Lu Xun

Wandering

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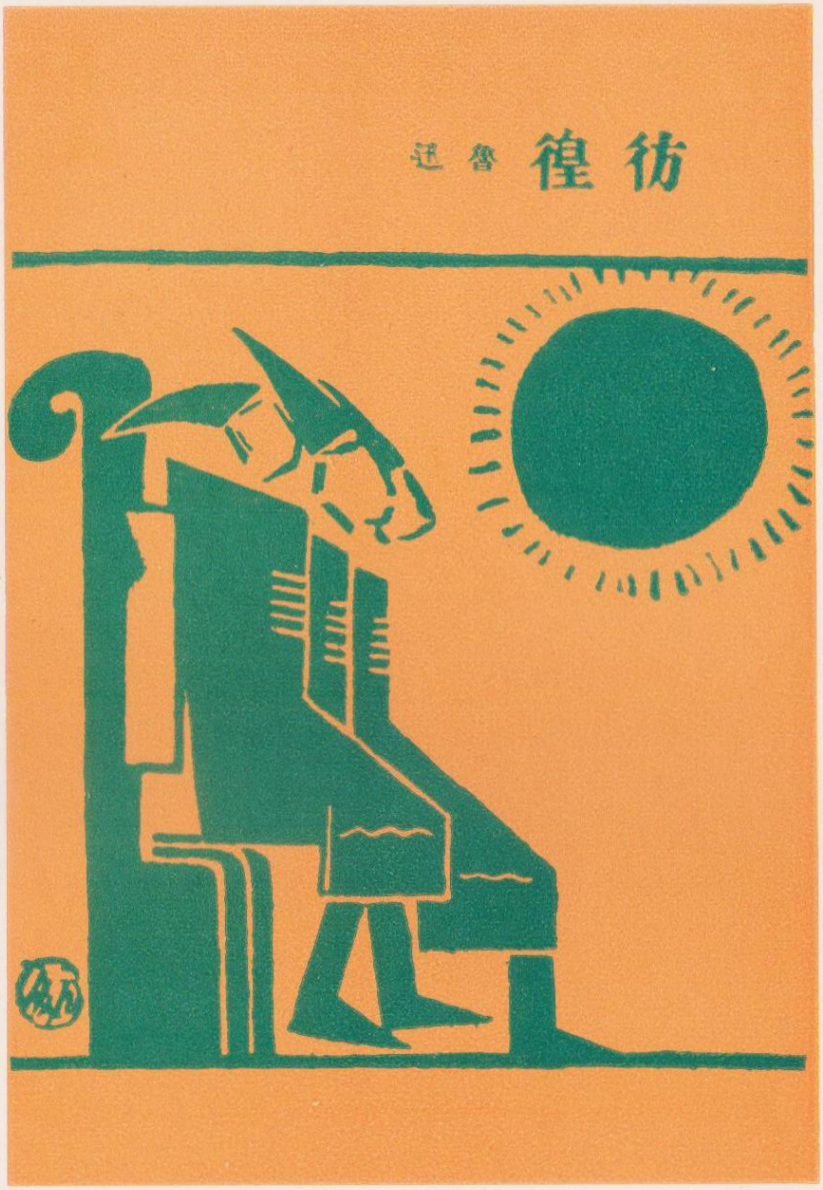

The original cover of *Wandering*.

THE NEW-YEAR SACRIFICE

The end of the year by the old calendar does really seem a more natural end to the year for, to say nothing of the villages and towns, the very sky seems to proclaim the New Year's approach. Intermittent flashes from pallid, lowering evening clouds are followed by the rumble of crackers bidding farewell to the Hearth God* and, before the deafening reports of the bigger bangs close at hand have died away, the air is filled with faint whiffs of gunpowder. On one such night I returned to Luzhen, my home town. I call it my home town, but as I had not made my home there for some time I put up at the house of a certain Fourth Mr. Lu, whom I am obliged to address as Fourth Uncle since he belongs to the generation before mine in our clan. A former Imperial Academy licentiate who believes in Neo-Confucianism,** he seemed very little changed, just slightly older, but without any beard as yet. Having exchanged some polite remarks upon meeting he observed that I was fatter, and having observed that I was fatter launched into a violent attack on the reformists.*** I did not take this personally, however, as the object of his attack was Kang Youwei. Still, conversation proved so difficult that I shortly found myself alone in the study.

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* On the twenty-third of the twelfth lunar month the Hearth God was supposed to go up to heaven to make a report.

** The Confucian school in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) which claimed that all things in the universe and the feudal order were ordained by "Reason" and could never change.

*** Referring to Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao and others who in 1898, supported by Emperor Guang Xu, started a bourgeois reform movement. After this was crushed by the die-hards, Kang Youwei and others fled abroad and organized a royalist group advocating constitutional monarchy, becoming a reactionary political clique.

I rose late the next day and went out after lunch to see relatives and friends, spending the following day in the same way. They were all very little changed, just slightly older; but every family was busy preparing for the New-Year sacrifice. This is the great end-of-year ceremony in Luzhen, during which a reverent and splendid welcome is given to the God of Fortune so that he will send good luck for the coming year. Chickens and geese are killed, pork is bought, and everything is scrubbed and scoured until all the women's arms — some still in twisted silver bracelets — turn red in the water. After the meat is cooked chopsticks are thrust into it at random, and when this "offering" is set out at dawn, incense and candles are lit and the God of Fortune is respectfully invited to come and partake of it. The worshippers are confined to men and, of course, after worshipping they go on letting off firecrackers as before. This is done every year, in every household — so long as it can afford the offering and crackers — and naturally this year was no exception.

The sky became overcast and in the afternoon it was filled with a flurry of snowflakes, some as large as plum-blossom petals, which merged with the smoke and the bustling atmosphere to make the small town a welter of confusion. By the time I had returned to my uncle's study, the roof of the house was already white with snow which made the room brighter than usual, highlighting the red stone rubbing that hung on the wall of the big character "Longevity" as written by the Taoist saint Chen Tuan.* One of the pair of scrolls flanking it had fallen down and was lying loosely rolled up on the long table. The other, still in its place, bore the inscription "Understanding of principles brings peace of mind." Idly, I strolled over to the desk beneath the window to turn over the pile of books on it, but only found an apparently incomplete set of *The Kang Xi Dictionary*, the *Selected Writings of Neo-Confucian Philoso-*

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* A tenth-century hermit.

phers, and *Commentaries on the Four Books*.* At all events I must leave the next day, I decided.

Besides, the thought of my meeting with Xianglin's Wife the previous day was preying on my mind. It had happened in the afternoon. On my way back from calling on a friend in the eastern part of the town, I had met her by the river and knew from the fixed look in her eyes that she was going to accost me. Of all the people I had seen during this visit to Luzhen, none had changed so much as she had. Her hair, streaked with grey five years before, was now completely white, making her appear much older than one around forty. Her sallow, dark-tinged face that looked as if it had been carved out of wood was fearfully wasted and had lost the grief-stricken expression it had borne before. The only sign of life about her was the occasional flicker of her eyes. In one hand she had a bamboo basket containing a chipped, empty bowl; in the other, a bamboo pole, taller than herself, that was split at the bottom. She had clearly become a beggar pure and simple.

I stopped, waiting for her to come and ask for money.

"So you're back?" were her first words.

"Yes."

"That's good. You are a scholar who's travelled and seen the world. There's something I want to ask you." A sudden gleam lit up her lacklustre eyes.

This was so unexpected that surprise rooted me to the spot.

"It's this." She drew two paces nearer and lowered her voice, as if letting me into a secret. "Do dead people turn into ghosts or not?"

My flesh crept. The way she had fixed me with her eyes made a shiver run down my spine, and I felt far more nervous than when a surprise test is sprung on you at school and the teacher insists on standing over you. Personally, I had never bothered myself in the least about whether spirits existed or not; but what was the best answer to give her now? I hesitated

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* Compiled by Luo Pei in the Qing Dynasty for use in the imperial examinations.

for a moment, reflecting that the people here still believed in spirits, but she seemed to have her doubts, or rather hopes — she hoped for life after death and dreaded it at the same time. Why increase the sufferings of someone with a wretched life? For her sake, I thought, I'd better say there was.

"Quite possibly, I'd say," I told her falteringly.

"That means there must be a hell too?"

"What, hell?" I faltered, very taken aback. "Hell? Logically speaking, there should be too — but not necessarily. Who cares anyway?"

"Then will all the members of a family meet again after death?"

"Well, as to whether they'll meet again or not. . . ." I realized now what an utter fool I was. All my hesitation and manoeuvring had been no match for her three questions. Promptly taking fright, I decided to recant. "In that case . . . actually, I'm not sure. . . . In fact, I'm not sure whether there are ghosts or not either."

To avoid being pressed by any further questions I walked off, then beat a hasty retreat to my uncle's house, feeling thoroughly disconcerted. I may have given her a dangerous answer, I was thinking. Of course, she may just be feeling lonely because everybody else is celebrating now, but could she have had something else in mind? Some premonition? If she had had some other idea, and something happens as a result, then my answer should indeed be partly responsible. . . . Then I laughed at myself for brooding so much over a chance meeting when it could have no serious significance. No wonder certain educationists called me neurotic. Besides, I had distinctly declared, "I'm not sure," contradicting the whole of my answer. This meant that even if something did happen, it would have nothing at all to do with me.

"I'm not sure" is a most useful phrase.

Bold inexperienced youngsters often take it upon themselves to solve problems or choose doctors for other people, and if by any chance things turn out badly they may well be held to blame; but by concluding their advice with this evasive expres-

sion they achieve blissful immunity from reproach. The necessity for such a phrase was brought home to me still more forcibly now, since it was indispensable even in speaking with a beggar woman.

However, I remained uneasy, and even after a night's rest my mind dwelt on it with a certain sense of foreboding. The oppressive snowy weather and the gloomy study increased my uneasiness. I had better leave the next day and go back to the city. A large dish of plain shark's fin stew at the Fu Xing Restaurant used to cost only a dollar. I wondered if this cheap delicacy had risen in price or not. Though my good companions of the old days had scattered, that shark's fin must still be sampled even if I were on my own. Whatever happened I would leave the next day, I decided.

Since, in my experience, things I hoped would not happen and felt should not happen invariably did occur all the same, I was much afraid this would prove another such case. And, sure enough, the situation soon took a strange turn. Towards evening I heard what sounded like a discussion in the inner room, but the conversation ended before long and my uncle walked away observing loudly, "What a moment to choose! Now of all times! Isn't that proof enough she was a bad lot?"

My initial astonishment gave way to a deep uneasiness; I felt that this had something to do with me. I looked out of the door, but no one was there. I waited impatiently till their servant came in before dinner to brew tea. Then at last I had a chance to make some inquiries.

"Who was Mr. Lu so angry with just now?" I asked.

"Why, Xianglin's Wife, of course," was the curt reply.

"Xianglin's Wife? Why?" I pressed.

"She's gone."

"Dead?" My heart missed a beat. I started and must have changed colour. But since the servant kept his head lowered, all this escaped him. I pulled myself together enough to ask.

"When did she die?"

"When? Last night or today — I'm not sure."

"How did she die?"

"How? Of poverty of course." After this stolid answer he withdrew, still without having raised his head to look at me.

My agitation was only short-lived, however. For now that my premonition had come to pass, I no longer had to seek comfort in my own "I'm not sure," or his "dying of poverty," and my heart was growing lighter. Only from time to time did I still feel a little guilty. Dinner was served, and my uncle impressively kept me company. Tempted as I was to ask about Xianglin's Wife, I knew that, although he had read that "ghosts and spirits are manifestations of the dual forces of Nature,"* he was still so superstitious that on the eve of the New-Year sacrifice it would be unthinkable to mention anything like death or illness. In case of necessity one should use veiled allusions, but since this was unfortunately beyond me I had to bite back the questions which kept rising to the tip of my tongue. And my uncle's solemn expression suddenly made me suspect that he looked on me too as a bad lot who had chosen this moment, now of all times, to come and trouble him. To set his mind at rest as quickly as I could, I told him at once of my plan to leave Luzhen the next day and go back to the city. He did not press me to stay, and at last the uncomfortably quiet meal came to an end.

Winter days are short, and because it was snowing darkness had already enveloped the whole town. All was stir and commotion in the lighted houses, but outside was remarkably quiet. And the snowflakes hissing down on the thick snowdrifts intensified one's sense of loneliness. Seated alone in the amber light of the vegetable-oil lamp I reflected that this wretched and forlorn woman, abandoned in the dust like a worn-out toy of which its owners have tired, had once left her own imprint in the dust, and those who enjoyed life must have wondered at her for wishing to live on; but now at last she had been swept away by death. Whether spirits existed or not I did not know; but in this world of ours the end of a futile existence, the

* This was said by the Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian Zhang Zai.

removal of someone whom others are tired of seeing, was just as well both for them and for the individual concerned. Occupied with these reflections, I listened quietly to the hissing of the snow outside, until little by little I felt more relaxed.

But the fragments of her life that I had seen or heard about before combined now to form a whole.

She was not from Luzhen. Early one winter, when my uncle's family wanted a new maid, Old Mrs. Wei the go-between brought her along. She had a white mourning band round her hair and was wearing a black skirt, blue jacket, and pale green bodice. Her age was about twenty-six, and though her face was sallow her cheeks were red. Old Mrs. Wei introduced her as Xianglin's Wife, a neighbour of her mother's family, who wanted to go out to work now that her husband had died. My uncle frowned at this, and my aunt knew that he disapproved of taking on a widow. She looked just the person for them, though, with her big strong hands and feet; and, judging by her downcast eyes and silence, she was a good worker who would know her place. So my aunt ignored my uncle's frown and kept her. During her trial period she worked from morning till night as if she found resting irksome, and proved strong enough to do the work of a man; so on the third day she was taken on for five hundred cash a month.

Everybody called her Xianglin's Wife and no one asked her own name, but since she had been introduced by someone from Wei Village as a neighbour, her surname was presumably also Wei. She said little, only answering briefly when asked a question. Thus it took them a dozen days or so to find out bit by bit that she had a strict mother-in-law at home and a brother-in-law of ten or so, old enough to cut wood. Her husband, who had died that spring, had been a woodcutter too, and had been ten years younger than she was. This little was all they could learn.

Time passed quickly. She went on working as hard as ever, not caring what she ate, never sparing herself. It was generally agreed that the Lu family's maid actually got through more

work than a hard-working man. At the end of the year, she swept and mopped the floors, killed the chickens and geese, and sat up to boil the sacrificial meat, all single-handed, so that they did not need to hire extra help. And she for her part was quite contented. Little by little the trace of a smile appeared at the corners of her mouth, while her face became whiter and plumper.

Just after the New Year she came back from washing rice by the river most upset because in the distance she had seen a man, pacing up and down on the opposite bank, who looked like her husband's elder cousin — very likely he had come in search of her. When my aunt in alarm pressed her for more information, she said nothing. As soon as my uncle knew of this he frowned.

"That's bad," he observed. "She must have run away."

Before very long this inference was confirmed.

About a fortnight later, just as this incident was beginning to be forgotten, Old Mrs. Wei suddenly brought along a woman in her thirties whom she introduced as Xianglin's mother. Although this woman looked like the hill-dweller she was, she behaved with great self-possession and had a ready tongue in her head. After the usual civilities she apologized for coming to take her daughter-in-law back, explaining that early spring was a busy time and they were short-handed at home with only old people and children around.

"If her mother-in-law wants her back, there's nothing more to be said," was my uncle's comment.

Thereupon her wages were reckoned up. They came to 1,750 cash, all of which she had left in the keeping of her mistress without spending any of it. My aunt gave the entire sum to Xianglin's mother, who took her daughter-in-law's clothes as well, expressed her thanks, and left. By this time it was noon.

"Oh, the rice! Didn't Xianglin's Wife go to wash the rice?" exclaimed my aunt some time later. It was probably hunger that reminded her of lunch.

A general search started then for the rice-washing basket. My aunt searched the kitchen, then the hall, then the bedroom;

but not a sign of the basket was to be seen. My uncle could not find it outside either, until he went right down to the riverside. Then he saw it set down fair and square on the bank, some vegetables beside it.

Some people on the bank told him that a boat with a white awning had moored there that morning but, since the awning covered the boat completely, they had no idea who was inside and had paid no special attention to begin with. But when Xianglin's Wife had arrived and was kneeling down to wash rice, two men who looked as if they came from the hills had jumped off the boat and seized her. Between them they dragged her on board. She wept and shouted at first but soon fell silent, probably because she was gagged. Then along came two women, a stranger and Old Mrs. Wei. It was difficult to see clearly into the boat, but the victim seemed to be lying, tied up, on the planking.

"Disgraceful! Still . . ." said my uncle.

That day my aunt cooked the midday meal herself, and their son Aniu lit the fire.

After lunch Old Mrs. Wei came back.

"Disgraceful!" said my uncle.

"What's the meaning of this? How dare you show your face here again?" My aunt, who was washing up, started fuming as soon as she saw her. "First you recommended her, then help them carry her off, causing such a shocking commotion. What will people think? Are you trying to make fools of our family?"

"*Aiya*, I was completely taken in! I've come specially to clear this up. How was I to know she'd left home without permission from her mother-in-law when she asked me to find her work? I'm sorry, Mr. Lu. I'm sorry, Mrs. Lu. I'm growing so stupid and careless in my old age, I've let my patrons down. It's lucky for me you're such kind, generous people, never hard on those below you. I promise to make it up to you by finding someone good this time."

"Still . . ." said my uncle.

That concluded the affair of Xianglin's Wife, and before long it was forgotten.

My aunt was the only one who still spoke of Xianglin's Wife. This was because most of the maids taken on afterwards turned out to be lazy or greedy, or both, none of them giving satisfaction. At such times she would invariably say to herself, "I wonder what's become of her now?" — implying that she would like to have her back. But by the next New Year she too had given up hope.

The first month was nearing its end when Old Mrs. Wei called on my aunt to wish her a happy New Year. Already tipsy, she explained that the reason for her coming so late was that she had been visiting her family in Wei Village in the hills for a few days. The conversation, naturally, soon touched on Xianglin's Wife.

"Xianglin's Wife?" cried Old Mrs. Wei cheerfully. "She's in luck now. When her mother-in-law dragged her home, she'd promised her to the sixth son of the Ho family in Ho Glen. So a few days after her return they put her in the bridal chair and sent her off."

"Gracious! What a mother-in-law!" exclaimed my aunt.

"Ah, madam, you really talk like a great lady! This is nothing to poor folk like us who live up in the hills. That young brother-in-law of hers still had no wife. If they didn't marry her off, where would the money have come from to get him one? Her mother-in-law is a clever, capable woman, a fine manager; so she married her off into the mountains. If she'd betrothed her to a family in the same village, she wouldn't have made so much; but as very few girls are willing to take a husband deep in the mountains at the back of beyond, she got eighty thousand cash. Now the second son has a wife, who cost only fifty thousand; and after paying the wedding expenses she's still over ten thousand in hand. Wouldn't you call her a fine manager?"

"But was Xianglin's Wife willing?"

"It wasn't a question of willing or not. Of course any woman

would make a row about it. All they had to do was tie her up, shove her into the chair, carry her to the man's house, force on her the bridal headdress, make her bow in the ceremonial hall, lock the two of them into their room — and that was that. But Xianglin's Wife is quite a character. I heard that she made a terrible scene. It was working for a scholar's family, everyone said, that made her different from other people. We go-betweens see life, madam. Some widows sob and shout when they remarry; some threaten to kill themselves; some refuse to go through the ceremony of bowing to heaven and earth after they've been carried to the man's house; some even smash the wedding candlesticks. But Xianglin's Wife was really extraordinary. They said she screamed and cursed all the way to Ho Glen, so that she was completely hoarse by the time they got there. When they dragged her out of the chair, no matter how the two chair-bearers and her brother-in-law held her, they couldn't make her go through the ceremony. The moment they were off guard and had loosened their grip — gracious Buddha! — she bashed her head on a corner of the altar, gashing it so badly that blood spurted out. Even though they smeared on two handfuls of incense ashes and tied it up with two pieces of red cloth, they couldn't stop the bleeding. It took quite a few of them to shut her up finally with the man in the bridal chamber, but even then she went on cursing. Oh, it was really. . . ." Shaking her head, she lowered her eyes and fell silent.

"And what then?" asked my aunt.

"They said that the next day she didn't get up." Old Mrs. Wei raised her eyes.

"And after?"

"After? She got up. At the end of the year she had a baby, a boy, who was reckoned as two this New Year. These few days when I was at home, some people back from a visit to Ho Glen said they'd seen her and her son, and both mother and child are plump. There's no mother-in-law over her, her man is a strong fellow who can earn a living, and the house belongs to them. Oh, yes, she's in luck all right."

After this event my aunt gave up talking of Xianglin's Wife.

But one autumn, after two New Years had passed since this good news of Xianglin's Wife, she once more crossed the threshold of my uncle's house, placing her round bulb-shaped basket on the table and her small bedding-roll under the eaves. As before, she had a white mourning band round her hair and was wearing a black skirt, blue jacket, and pale green bodice. Her face was sallow, her cheeks no longer red; and her downcast eyes, stained with tears, had lost their brightness. Just as before, it was Old Mrs. Wei who brought her to my aunt.

"It was really a bolt from the blue," she explained compassionately. "Her husband was a strong young fellow; who'd have thought that typhoid fever would carry him off? He'd taken a turn for the better, but then he ate some cold rice and got worse again. Luckily she had the boy and she can work — she's able to gather firewood, pick tea, or raise silkworms — so she could have managed on her own. But who'd have thought that the child, too, would be carried off by a wolf? It was nearly the end of spring, yet a wolf came to the glen — who could have guessed that? Now she's all on her own. Her husband's elder brother has taken over the house and turned her out. So she's no way to turn for help except to her former mistress. Luckily this time there's nobody to stop her and you happen to be needing someone, madam. That's why I've brought her here. I think someone used to your ways is much better than a new hand. . . ."

"I was really too stupid, really . . ." put in Xianglin's Wife, raising her lacklustre eyes. "All I knew was that when it snowed and wild beasts up in the hills had nothing to eat, they might come to the villages. I didn't know that in spring they might come too. I got up at dawn and opened the door, filled a small basket with beans and told our Amao to sit on the doorstep and shell them. He was such a good boy; he always did as he was told, and out he went. Then I went to the back to chop wood and wash the rice, and when the rice was in the pan I wanted to steam the beans. I called Amao, but there was no answer. When I went out to look there were beans all

over the ground but no Amao. He never went to the neighbours' houses to play; and, sure enough, though I asked everywhere he wasn't there. I got so worried, I begged people to help me find him. Not until that afternoon, after searching high and low, did they try the gully. There they saw one of his little shoes caught on a bramble. 'That's bad,' they said. 'A wolf must have got him.' And sure enough, further on, there he was lying in the wolf's den, all his innards eaten away, still clutching that little basket tight in his hand. . . ." At this point she broke down and could not go on.

My aunt had been undecided at first, but the rims of her eyes were rather red by the time Xianglin's Wife broke off. After a moment's thought she told her to take her things to the servants' quarters. Old Mrs. Wei heaved a sigh, as if a great weight had been lifted from her mind; and Xianglin's Wife, looking more relaxed than when first she came, went off quietly to put away her bedding without having to be told the way. So she started work again as a maid in Luzhen.

She was still known as Xianglin's Wife.

But now she was a very different woman. She had not worked there more than two or three days before her mistress realized that she was not as quick as before. Her memory was much worse too, while her face, like a death-mask, never showed the least trace of a smile. Already my aunt was expressing herself as not too satisfied. Though my uncle had frowned as before when she first arrived, they always had such trouble finding servants that he raised no serious objections, simply warning his wife on the quiet that while such people might seem very pathetic they exerted a bad moral influence. She could work for them but must have nothing to do with ancestral sacrifices. They would have to prepare all the dishes themselves. Otherwise they would be unclean and the ancestors would not accept them.

The most important events in my uncle's household were ancestral sacrifices, and formerly these had kept Xianglin's Wife especially busy, but now she had virtually nothing to do. As soon as the table had been placed in the centre of the hall

and a front curtain fastened around its legs, she started setting out the winecups and chopsticks in the way she still remembered.

"Put those down, Xianglin's Wife," cried my aunt hastily. "Leave that to me."

She drew back sheepishly then and went for the candlesticks.

"Put those down, Xianglin's Wife," cried my aunt again in haste. "I'll fetch them."

After walking round in the hall several times without finding anything to do, she moved doubtfully away. All she could do that day was to sit by the stove and feed the fire.

The townspeople still called her Xianglin's Wife, but in quite a different tone from before; and although they still talked to her, their manner was colder. Quite impervious to this, staring straight in front of her, she would tell everybody the story which night or day was never out of her mind.

"I was really too stupid, really," she would say. "All I knew was that when it snowed and the wild beasts up in the hills had nothing to eat, they might come to the villages. I didn't know that in spring they might come too. I got up at dawn and opened the door, filled a small basket with beans and told our Amao to sit on the doorstep and shell them. He was such a good boy; he always did as he was told, and out he went. Then I went to the back to chop wood and wash the rice, and when the rice was in the pan I wanted to steam the beans. I called Amao, but there was no answer. When I went out to look, there were beans all over the ground but no Amao. He never went to the neighbours' houses to play; and, sure enough, though I asked everywhere he wasn't there. I got so worried, I begged people to help me find him. Not until that afternoon, after searching high and low, did they try the gully. There they saw one of his little shoes caught on a bramble. 'That's bad,' they said. 'A wolf must have got him.' And sure enough, further on, there he was lying in the wolf's den, all his innards eaten away, still clutching that little basket tight in his hand. . . ." At this point her voice would be choked with tears.

This story was so effective that men hearing it often stopped smiling and walked blankly away, while the women not only seemed to forgive her but wiped the contemptuous expression off their faces and added their tears to hers. Indeed, some old women who had not heard her in the street sought her out specially to hear her sad tale. And when she broke down, they too shed the tears which had gathered in their eyes, after which they sighed and went away satisfied, exchanging eager comments.

As for her, she asked nothing better than to tell her sad story over and over again, often gathering three or four hearers around her. But before long everybody knew it so well that no trace of a tear could be seen even in the eyes of the most kindly, Buddha-invoking old ladies. In the end, practically the whole town could recite it by heart and were bored and exasperated to hear it repeated.

"I was really too stupid, really," she would begin.

"Yes. All you knew was that in snowy weather, when the wild beasts in the mountains had nothing to eat, they might come down to the villages." Cutting short her recital abruptly, they walked away.

She would stand there open-mouthed, staring after them stupidly, and then wander off as if she too were bored by the story. But she still tried hopefully to lead up from other topics such as small baskets, and other people's children to the story of her Amao. At the sight of a child of two or three she would say, "Ah, if my Amao were alive he'd be just that size. . . ."

Children would take fright at the look in her eyes and clutch the hem of their mothers' clothes to tug them away. Left by herself again, she would eventually walk blankly away. In the end everybody knew what she was like. If a child were present they would ask with a spurious smile, "If your Amao were alive, Xianglin's Wife, wouldn't he be just that size?"

She may not have realized that her tragedy, after being generally savoured for so many days, had long since grown so stale that it now aroused only revulsion and disgust. But she

seemed to sense the cold mockery in their smiles, and the fact that there was no need for her to say any more. So she would simply look at them in silence.

New-Year preparations always start in Luzhen on the twentieth day of the twelfth lunar month. That year my uncle's household had to take on a temporary man-servant. And since there was more than he could do they asked Amah Liu to help by killing the chickens and geese; but being a devout vegetarian who would not kill living creatures, she would only wash the sacrificial vessels. Xianglin's Wife, with nothing to do but feed the fire, sat there at a loose end watching Amah Liu as she worked. A light snow began to fall.

"Ah, I was really too stupid," said Xianglin's Wife as if to herself, looking at the sky and sighing.

"There you go again, Xianglin's Wife." Amah Liu glanced with irritation at her face. "Tell me, wasn't that when you got that scar on your forehead?"

All the reply she received was a vague murmur.

"Tell me this: What made you willing after all?"

"Willing?"

"Yes. Seems to me you must have been willing. Otherwise. . . ."

"Oh, you don't know how strong he was."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe he was so strong that you with your strength couldn't have kept him off. You must have ended up willing. That talk of his being so strong is just an excuse."

"Why . . . just try for yourself and see." She smiled.

Amah Liu's lined face broke into a smile too, wrinkling up like a walnut-shell. Her small beady eyes swept the other woman's forehead, then fastened on her eyes. At once Xianglin's Wife stopped smiling, as if embarrassed, and turned her eyes away to watch the snow.

"That was really a bad bargain you struck, Xianglin's Wife," said Amah Liu mysteriously. "If you'd held out longer or knocked yourself to death outright, that would have been better. As it is, you're guilty of a great sin though you lived less than

two years with your second husband. Just think: when you go down to the lower world, the ghosts of both men will start fighting over you. Which ought to have you? The King of Hell will have to saw you into two and divide you between them. I feel it really is. . . ."

Xianglin's Wife's face registered terror then. This was something no one had told her up in the mountains.

"Better guard against that in good time, I say. Go to the Temple of the Tutelary God and buy a threshold to be trampled on instead of you by thousands of people. If you atone for your sins in this life you'll escape torment after death."

Xianglin's Wife said nothing at the time, but she must have taken this advice to heart, for when she got up the next morning there were dark rims round her eyes. After breakfast she went to the Temple of the Tutelary God at the west end of the town and asked to buy a threshold as an offering. At first the priest refused, only giving a grudging consent after she was reduced to tears of desperation. The price charged was twelve thousand cash.

She had long since given up talking to people after their contemptuous reception of Amao's story; but as word of her conversation with Amah Liu spread, many of the townsfolk took a fresh interest in her and came once more to provoke her into talking. The topic, of course, had changed to the scar on her forehead.

"Tell me, Xianglin's Wife, what made you willing in the end?" one would ask.

"What a waste, to have bashed yourself like that for nothing," another would chime in, looking at her scar.

She must have known from their smiles and tone of voice that they were mocking her, for she simply stared at them without a word and finally did not even turn her head. All day long she kept her lips tightly closed, bearing on her head the scar considered by everyone as a badge of shame, while she shopped, swept the floor, washed the vegetables and prepared the rice in silence. Nearly a year went by before she took her accumulated wages from my aunt, changed them for

twelve silver dollars, and asked for leave to go to the west end of the town. In less time than it takes for a meal she was back again, looking much comforted. With an unaccustomed light in her eyes, she told my aunt contentedly that she had now offered up a threshold in the Temple of the Tutelary God.

When the time came for the ancestral sacrifice at the winter solstice she worked harder than ever, and as soon as my aunt took out the sacrificial vessels and helped Aniu to carry the table into the middle of the hall, she went confidently to fetch the winecups and chopsticks.

"Put those down, Xianglin's Wife!" my aunt called hastily.

She withdrew her hand as if scorched, her face turned ashen grey, and instead of fetching the candlesticks she just stood there in a daze until my uncle came in to burn some incense and told her to go away. This time the change in her was phenomenal: the next day her eyes were sunken, her spirit seemed broken. She took fright very easily too, afraid not only of the dark and of shadows, but of meeting anyone. Even the sight of her own master or mistress set her trembling like a mouse that had strayed out of its hole in broad daylight. The rest of the time she would sit stupidly as if carved out of wood. In less than half a year her hair had turned grey, and her memory had deteriorated so much that she often forgot to go and wash the rice.

"What's come over Xianglin's Wife? We should never have taken her on again," my aunt would sometimes say in front of her, as if to warn her.

But there was no change in her, no sign that she would ever recover her wits. So they decided to get rid of her and tell her to go back to Old Mrs. Wei. That was what they were saying, at least, while I was there; and, judging by subsequent developments, this is evidently what they must have done. But whether she started begging as soon as she left my uncle's house, or whether she went first to Old Mrs. Wei and later became a beggar, I do not know.

I was woken up by the noisy explosion of crackers close at

hand and, from the faint glow shed by the yellow oil lamp and the bangs of fireworks as my uncle's household celebrated the sacrifice, I knew that it must be nearly dawn. Listening drowsily I heard vaguely the ceaseless explosion of crackers in the distance. It seemed to me that the whole town was enveloped by the dense cloud of noise in the sky, mingling with the whirling snowflakes. Enveloped in this medley of sound I relaxed; the doubt which had preyed on my mind from dawn till night was swept clean away by the festive atmosphere, and I felt only that the saints of heaven and earth had accepted the sacrifice and incense and were reeling with intoxication in the sky, preparing to give Luzhen's people boundless good fortune.

February 7, 1924

IN THE TAVERN

During my travels from the north to the southeast I made a detour to my home and then went on to S—. This town, only thirty li from my native place, can be reached in less than half a day by a small boat. I had taught for a year in a school here. In the depth of winter after snow the landscape was bleak; but a combination of indolence and nostalgia made me put up briefly in the Luo Si Hotel, a new hotel since my time. The town was small. I looked for several old colleagues I thought I might find, but not one of them was there. They had long since gone their different ways. And when I passed the gate of the school that too had changed its name and appearance, making me feel quite a stranger. In less than two hours my enthusiasm had waned and I rather reproached myself for coming.

The hotel I was in let rooms but did not serve meals, which had to be ordered from outside, but these were about as unpalatable as mud. Outside the window was only a stained and spotted wall, covered with withered moss. Above was the leaden sky, a colourless dead white; moreover a flurry of snow had begun to fall. Since my lunch had been poor and I had nothing to do to while away the time, my thoughts turned quite naturally to a small tavern I had known well in the past called One Barrel House, which I reckoned could not be far from the hotel. I immediately locked my door and set out to find it. Actually, all I wanted was to escape the boredom of my stay, not to do any serious drinking. One Barrel House was still there, its narrow mouldering front and dilapidated signboard unchanged. But from the landlord down to the waiters there was not a soul I knew — in One Barrel House too I had become a complete stranger. Still I climbed the familiar stair-

way in the corner to the little upper storey. The five small wooden tables up here were unchanged; only the window at the back, originally latticed, had been fitted with glass panes.

"A catty of yellow wine. To go with it? Ten pieces of fried beancurd with plenty of paprika sauce."

As I gave this order to the waiter who had come up with me I went and sat down at the table by the back window. The fact that the place was empty enabled me to pick the best seat, one with a view of the deserted garden below. Most likely this did not belong to the tavern. I had looked out at it many times in the past, sometimes too in snowy weather. But now, to eyes accustomed to the north, the sight was sufficiently striking. Several old plum trees in full bloom were braving the snow as if oblivious of the depth of winter; while among the thick dark green foliage of a camellia beside the crumbling pavilion a dozen crimson blossoms blazed bright as flame in the snow, indignant and arrogant, as if despising the wanderer's wanderlust. At this I suddenly remembered the moistness of the heaped snow here, clinging, glistening and shining, quite unlike the dry northern snow which when a high wind blows will fly up to fill the sky like mist. . . .

"Your wine, sir . . ." said the waiter carelessly, putting down my cup, chopsticks, wine-pot and dish. The wine had come. I turned to the table, set everything straight and filled my cup. I felt that the north was certainly not my home, yet when I came south I could only count as a stranger. The powdery dry snow which whirled through the air up there and the clinging soft snow here were equally alien to me. In a slightly melancholy mood I took a leisurely sip of wine. The wine tasted pure and the fried beancurd was excellently cooked, only the paprika sauce was not hot enough; but then the people of S— had never understood pungent flavours.

Probably because it was the afternoon, the place had none of the atmosphere of a tavern. By the time I had drunk three cups, the four other tables were still unoccupied. A sense of loneliness stole over me as I stared at the deserted garden, yet I did not want other customers to come up. Thus I could not

help being irritated by the occasional footsteps on the stairs, and was relieved to find it was only the waiter. And so I drank another two cups of wine.

"This time it must be a customer," I thought, at the sound of footsteps much slower than those of the waiter. When I judged that he must be at the top of the stairs, I raised my head rather apprehensively to look at this extraneous company and stood up with a start. It had never occurred to me that I might run into a friend here — if such he would still let me call him. The newcomer was an old classmate who had been my colleague when I was a teacher, and although he had changed a great deal I knew him at a glance. Only he had become very slow in his movements, quite unlike the spry dynamic Lü Weifu of the old days.

"Well, Weifu, is it you? Fancy meeting you here!"

"Well, well, is it you? Just fancy. . . ."

I invited him to join me, but he seemed to hesitate before doing so. This struck me as strange, then I felt rather hurt and annoyed. A closer look revealed that Lü had still the same unkempt hair and beard, but his pale lantern-jawed face was thin and wasted. He appeared very quiet if not dispirited, and his eyes beneath their thick black brows had lost their alertness; but while looking slowly around, at sight of the deserted garden they suddenly flashed with the same piercing light I had seen so often at school.

"Well," I said cheerfully but very awkwardly, "it must be ten years since last we saw each other. I heard long ago that you were at Jinan, but I was so wretchedly lazy I never wrote. . . ."

"It was the same with me. I've been at Taiyuan for more than two years now with my mother. When I came back to fetch her I learned that you had already left, left for good and all."

"What are you doing at Taiyuan?" I asked.

"Teaching in the family of a fellow-provincial."

"And before that?"

"Before that?" He took a cigarette from his pocket, lit it

and put it to his lips, then watching the smoke he puffed out said reflectively, "Just futile work, amounting to nothing at all."

He in turn asked what I had been doing all these years. I gave him a rough idea, at the same time calling the waiter to bring a cup and chopsticks in order that Lü could share my wine while we had another two catties heated. We also ordered dishes. In the past we had never stood on ceremony, but now we began deferring to each other so that finally we fixed on four dishes suggested by the waiter: peas spiced with aniseed, jellied pork, fried beancurd and salted mackerel.

"As soon as I came back I knew I was a fool." Holding his cigarette in one hand and the winecup in the other, he spoke with a bitter smile. "When I was young, I saw the way bees or flies stuck to one spot. If something frightened them they would buzz off, but after flying in a small circle they would come back to stop in the same place; and I thought this really ridiculous as well as pathetic. Little did I think I'd be flying back myself too after only describing a small circle. And I didn't think you'd come back either. Couldn't you have flown a little further?"

"That's difficult to say. Probably I too have simply described a small circle." I also spoke with a rather bitter smile. "But why did you fly back?"

"For something quite futile." In one gulp he emptied his cup, then took several pulls at his cigarette and his eyes widened a little. "Futile — but you may as well hear about it."

The waiter brought up the freshly heated wine and dishes and set them on the table. The smoke and the fragrance of fried beancurd seemed to make the upstairs room more cheerful, while outside the snow fell still more thickly.

"Perhaps you knew," he went on, "that I had a little brother who died when he was three and was buried in the country here. I can't even remember clearly what he looked like, but I've heard my mother say he was a very lovable child and very fond of me. Even now it brings tears to her eyes to speak of him. This spring an elder cousin wrote to tell us that the ground beside his grave was gradually being swamped, and he

was afraid before long it would slip into the river: we should go at once and do something about it. This upset my mother so much that she couldn't sleep for several nights — she can read letters herself, you know. But what could I do? I had no money, no time: there was nothing that could be done.

"Now at last, because I'm on holiday over New Year, I've been able to come south to move his grave." He tossed off another cup of wine and looking out of the window exclaimed, "Could you find anything like this up north? Blossom in thick snow, and the soil beneath the snow not frozen. So the day before yesterday I bought a small coffin in town — because I reckoned that the one under the ground must have rotted long ago — took cotton and bedding, hired four workmen, and went into the country to move his grave. I suddenly felt most elated, eager to dig up the grave, eager to see the bones of the little brother who had been so fond of me: this was a new experience for me. When we reached the grave, sure enough, the river was encroaching on it and the water was less than two feet away. The poor grave not having had any earth added to it for two years was subsiding. Standing there in the snow, I pointed to it firmly and ordered the workmen, 'Dig it up.'

"I really am a commonplace fellow. I felt that my voice at this juncture was rather unnatural, and that this order was the greatest I had given in all my life. But the workmen didn't find it strange in the least, and set to work to dig. When they reached the enclosure I had a look, and sure enough the coffin had rotted almost completely away: there was nothing left but a heap of splinters and chips of wood. My heart beat faster as I set these aside myself, very carefully, wanting to see my little brother. However, I was in for a surprise. Bedding, clothes, skeleton, all had gone!

"I thought, 'These have all disappeared, but hair, I have always heard, is the last thing to rot. There may still be some hair.' So I bent down and searched carefully in the mud where the pillow should have been, but there was none. Not a trace remained."

I suddenly noticed that the rims of his eyes were rather red, but immediately attributed this to the effect of the wine. He had scarcely touched the dishes but had been drinking incessantly and must have drunk more than a catty; his looks and gestures had become more animated, more like the Lü Weifu whom I had known. I called the waiter to heat two more catties of wine, then turned back to face my companion, my cup in my hand, as I listened to him in silence.

"Actually there was really no need to move it: I had only to level the ground, sell the coffin and make an end of the business. Although it might have seemed odd my going to sell the coffin, if the price were low enough the shop from which I bought it would have taken it, and I could at least have recouped a few cents for wine. But I didn't. I still spread out the bedding, wrapped up in cotton some of the clay where his body had been, covered it up, put it in the new coffin, moved it to my father's grave and buried it beside him. And having a brick vault built kept me busy most of yesterday too, supervising the work. But in this way I can count the affair ended, at least enough to deceive my mother and set her mind at rest. Well, well, the look you're giving me shows you are wondering why I've changed so much. Yes, I still remember the time when we went together to the tutelary god's temple to pull off the idols' beards, and how for days on end we used to discuss methods of reforming China until we even came to blows. But this is how I am now, willing to let things slide and to compromise. Sometimes I think, 'If my old friends were to see me now, probably they would no longer acknowledge me as a friend.' But this is what I am like now."

He took out another cigarette, put it to his lips and lit it.

"Judging by your expression, you still expect something of me. Naturally I am much more obtuse than before, but I'm not completely blind yet. This makes me grateful to you, at the same time rather uneasy. I'm afraid I've let down the old friends who even now still wish me well. . . ." He stopped and took several puffs at his cigarette before going on slowly, "Only today, just before coming to this One Barrel House, I

did something futile yet something I was glad to do. My former neighbour on the east side was called Changfu. He was a boatman and had a daughter named Ashun. When you came to my house in those days you may have seen her but you certainly wouldn't have paid any attention to her, because she was still small then. She didn't grow up to be pretty either, having just an ordinary thin oval face and pale skin. Only her eyes were unusually large with very long lashes and whites as clear as a cloudless night sky — I mean the cloudless sky of the north on a windless day; here it is not so clear. She was very capable. She lost her mother while in her teens, and had to look after a small brother and sister besides waiting on her father; and all this she did very competently. She was so economical too that the family gradually grew better off. There was scarcely a neighbour who didn't praise her, and even Changfu often expressed his appreciation. When I was setting off on my journey this time, my mother remembered her — old people's memories are so long. She recalled that once Ashun saw someone wearing red velvet flowers in her hair, and wanted a spray for herself. When she couldn't get one she cried nearly all night, so that her father beat her and her eyes remained red and swollen for two or three days. These red flowers came from another province and couldn't be bought even in S—, so how could she ever hope to have any? Since I was coming south this time, my mother told me to buy two sprays for her.

"Far from feeling vexed at this commission, I was actually delighted, really glad of the chance to do something for Ashun. The year before last I came back to fetch my mother, and one day when Changfu was at home I dropped in for some reason to chat with him. By way of refreshment he offered me some buckwheat mush, remarking that they added white sugar to it. As you can see, a boatman who could afford white sugar was obviously not poor and must eat pretty well. I let myself be persuaded but begged them to give me only a small bowl. He quite understood and instructed Ashun, 'These scholars have no appetite. Give him a small bowl, but add more sugar.' However, when she had prepared the concoction and brought it

in it gave me quite a turn, because it was a large bowl, as much as I could eat in a whole day. Though compared with Changfu's bowl, admittedly, it was small. This was the first time I had eaten buckwheat mush, and I just could not stomach it though it was so sweet. I gulped down a few mouthfuls and decided to leave the rest when I happened to notice Ashun standing some distance away in one corner of the room, and I simply hadn't the heart to put down my chopsticks. In her face I saw both hope and fear — fear presumably that she had prepared it badly, and hope that we would find it to our liking. I knew that if I left most of my bowl she would feel very disappointed and sorry. I made up my mind to it and shovelled the stuff down, eating almost as fast as Changfu. That taught me how painful it is forcing oneself to eat; and I remembered experiencing the same difficulty as a child when I had to finish a bowl of worm-medicine mixed with brown sugar. I didn't hold it against her though, because her half-suppressed smile of satisfaction when she came to take away our empty bowls more than repaid me for all my discomfort. So that night, although indigestion kept me from sleeping well and I had a series of nightmares, I still wished her a lifetime of happiness and hoped that for her sake the world would change for the better. But such thoughts were only the residue of my old dreams. The next instant I laughed at myself, and promptly forgot them.

"I hadn't known before that she had been beaten on account of a spray of velvet flowers, but when my mother spoke of it I remembered the buckwheat mush incident and became unaccountably diligent. First I made a search in Taiyuan, but none of the shops had them. It was only when I went to Jinan. . . ."

There was a rustle outside the window as a pile of snow slithered off the camellia which had been bending beneath its weight; then the branches of the tree straightened themselves, flaunting their thick dark foliage and blood-red flowers even more clearly. The sky had grown even more leaden. Sparrows were twittering, no doubt because dusk was falling and finding

nothing to eat on the snow-covered ground they were going back early to their nests to sleep.

"It was only when I went to Jinan. . . ." He glanced out of the window, then turned back, drained a cup of wine, took several puffs at his cigarette and went on, "Only then did I buy the artificial flowers. I didn't know whether they were the same as those she had been beaten for, but at least they were made of velvet. And not knowing whether she liked deep or light colours, I bought one spray of red, one spray of pink, and brought them both here.

"This afternoon straight after lunch I went to see Changfu, having stayed on an extra day just for this. Though his house was still there it seemed to me rather gloomy, but perhaps that was simply my imagination. His son and second daughter Azhao were standing at the gate. Both of them had grown. Azhao is quite unlike her sister, she looks simply ghastly; but at my approach she rushed into the house. I learned from the boy that Changfu was not at home. 'And your elder sister?' I asked. At that he glared at me and demanded what my business with her was. He looked fierce enough to fling himself at me and bite me. I dithered, then walked away. Nowadays I just let things slide. . . .

"You can have no idea how I dread calling on people, much more so than in the old days. Because I know what a nuisance I am, I am even sick of myself; so, knowing this, why inflict myself on others? But since this commission had to be carried out, after some reflection I went back to the firewood shop almost opposite their house. The proprietor's mother old Mrs. Fa was still there and, what's more, still recognized me. She actually asked me into the shop to sit down. After the usual polite preliminaries I told her why I had come back to S— and was looking for Changfu. I was taken aback when she sighed:

" 'What a pity Ashun hadn't the luck to wear these velvet flowers.'

"Then she told me the whole story. 'It was probably last

spring that Ashun began to look pale and thin. Later she had fits of crying, but if asked why she wouldn't say. Sometimes she even cried all night until Changfu couldn't help losing his temper and swearing at her for carrying on like a crazy old maid. But when autumn came she caught a chill, then she took to her bed and never got up again. Only a few days before she died she confessed to Changfu that she had long ago started spitting blood and perspiring at night like her mother. But she hadn't told him for fear of worrying him. One evening her uncle Changgeng came to demand a loan — he was always sponging on them — and when she wouldn't give him any money he sneered, "Don't give yourself airs; your man isn't even up to me!" That upset her, but she was too shy to ask any questions and could only cry. As soon as Changfu knew this, he told her what a decent fellow the man chosen for her was; but it was too late. Besides, she didn't believe him. "It's a good thing I'm already this way," she said. "Now nothing matters any more." '

"Old Mrs. Fa also said, 'If her man really hadn't been up to Changgeng, that would have been truly frightful. Not up to a chicken thief — what sort of creature would that be? But I saw him with my own eyes at the funeral: dressed in clean clothes and quite presentable. And he said with tears in his eyes that he'd worked hard all those years on the boat to save up money to marry, but now the girl was dead. Obviously he was really a good sort, and Changgeng had been lying. It was too bad that Ashun believed such a rascally liar and died for nothing. Still, we can't blame anyone else: this was Ashun's fate.'

"Since that was the case, my business was finished too. But what about the two sprays of artificial flowers I had brought with me? Well, I asked her to give them to Azhao. This Azhao had fled at the sight of me as if I were a wolf or monster; I really didn't want to give them to her. However, give them I did, and I have only to tell my mother that Ashun was delighted with them and that will be that. Who cares about such futile affairs anyway? One only wants to muddle

through them somehow. When I have muddled through New Year I shall go back to teaching the Confucian classics."

"Is that what you're teaching?" I asked in astonishment.

"Of course. Did you think I was teaching English? First I had two pupils, one studying the *Book of Songs*, the other *Mencius*. Recently I have got another, a girl, who is studying the *Canon for Girls*.* I don't even teach mathematics; not that I wouldn't teach it, but they don't want it taught."

"I could really never have guessed that you would be teaching such books."

"Their father wants them to study these. I'm an outsider, it's all the same to me. Who cares about such futile affairs anyway? There's no need to take them seriously. . . ."

His whole face was scarlet as if he were quite drunk, but the gleam in his eyes had died down. I gave a slight sigh, not knowing what to say. There was a clatter on the stairs as several customers came up. The first was short, with a round bloated face; the second was tall, with a conspicuous red nose. Behind them followed others, and as they walked up the small upper floor shook. I turned to Lü Weifu who was trying to catch my eye, then called for the bill.

"Is your salary enough to live on?" I asked as we prepared to leave.

"I have twenty dollars a month, not quite enough to manage on."

"What are your future plans then?"

"Future plans? I don't know. Just think: Has any single thing turned out as we hoped of all we planned in the past? I'm not sure of anything now, not even of what tomorrow will bring, not even of the next minute. . . ."

The waiter brought up the bill and handed it to me. Lü Weifu had abandoned his earlier formality. He just glanced at me, went on smoking, and allowed me to pay.

We left the tavern together, parting at the door because our

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* A book describing the feudal standard of behaviour for girls and the virtues they should cultivate.

hotels lay in opposite directions. As I walked back alone to my hotel, the cold wind buffeted my face with snowflakes, but I found this thoroughly refreshing. I saw that the sky, already dark, had interwoven with the houses and streets in the white, shifting web of thick snow.

February 16, 1924

A HAPPY FAMILY

After the style of Xu Qinwen*

". . . One writes simply as one feels: such a work is like sunlight, radiating from a source of infinite brightness, not like a spark from a flint struck on iron or stone. This alone is true art. And such a writer alone is a true artist. . . . But I . . . what do I rank as?"

Having thought so far he suddenly jumped out of bed. It had occurred to him that he must make some money by writing to support his family, and he had already decided to send his manuscripts to the *Happy Monthly* publishers, because the remuneration appeared to be comparatively generous. But in that case the choice of subjects would be limited, otherwise the work would probably not be accepted. All right, let it be limited. What were the chief problems occupying the minds of the younger generation? . . . Undoubtedly there must be not a few, perhaps a great many, concerning love, marriage, the family. . . . Yes, there were certainly many people perplexed by such questions, even now discussing them. In that case, write about the family! But how to write? . . . Otherwise it would probably not be accepted. Why predict anything unlucky? Still. . . .

Jumping out of bed, in four or five steps he reached the desk, sat down, took out a piece of paper with green lines, and promptly yet resignedly wrote the title: A Happy Family.

His pen immediately came to a standstill. He raised his head, his two eyes fixed on the ceiling, trying to decide on an environment for this Happy Family.

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* A novelist contemporary with Lu Xun. The author declared that he modelled this story on Xu's "An Ideal Companion."

"Beijing?" he thought. "That won't do; it's too dead, even the atmosphere is dead. Even if a high wall were built round this family, still the air could scarcely be kept separate. No, that would never do! Jiangsu and Zhejiang may start fighting any day, and Fujian is even more out of the question. Sichuan? Guangdong? They are in the midst of fighting.* What about Shandong or Henan? . . . No, one of them might be kidnapped, and if that happened the happy family would become an unhappy one. The rents in the foreign concessions in Shanghai and Tianjin are too high. . . . Somewhere abroad? Ridiculous. I don't know what Yunnan and Guizhou are like, but communications are too poor. . . ."

He racked his brains but, unable to think of a good place, decided to fix tentatively on A—. Then, however, he thought, "Nowadays many people object to the use of the Western alphabet to represent the names of people and places, saying it lessens the readers' interest. Probably I had better not use it in my story this time, to be on the safe side. In that case what would be a good place? There is fighting in Hunan too; the rents in Dalian have gone up again. In Chahar, Jilin and Heilongjiang I have heard there are brigands, so they won't do either! . . ."

Again he racked his brains to think of a good place, but in vain; so finally he made up his mind to fix tentatively on A— as the name of the place where his Happy Family should be.

"After all this Happy Family will have to be at A—. There can't be any question about that. The family naturally consists of a husband and wife — the master and mistress — who married for love. Their marriage contract contains over forty terms going into great detail, so that they have extraordinary equality and absolute freedom. Moreover they have both had a higher education and belong to the cultured élite. . . . Japanese-returned students are no longer the fashion, so let them be Western-returned students. The master of the house always

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* During this period there was civil war between warlords in many parts of China.

wears a foreign suit, his collar is always snowy white. His wife's hair is always curled up like a sparrow's nest in front, her pearly white teeth are always peeping out, but she wears Chinese dress. . . ."

"That won't do, that won't do! Twenty-five catties!"

Hearing a man's voice outside the window he involuntarily turned his head to look. The sun shone through the curtains hanging by the window, dazzling his eyes, while he heard a sound like small bundles of wood being thrown down. "It doesn't matter," he thought, turning back again. " 'Twenty-five catties' of what? . . . They are the cultured élite, devoted to the arts. But because they have both grown up in happy surroundings, they don't like Russian novels. Most Russian novels describe the lower classes, so they are really quite out of keeping with such a family. 'Twenty-five catties'? Never mind. In that case, what books do they read? . . . Byron's poetry? Keats? That won't do, neither of them are safe. . . . Ah, I have it: they both like reading *An Ideal Husband.* Although I haven't read the book myself, even university professors praise it so highly that I am sure this couple must enjoy it too. You read it, I read it — they have a copy each, two copies altogether in the family. . . ."

Becoming aware of a hollow feeling in his stomach, he put down the pen and rested his head on his hands, like a globe supported by two axles.

". . . The two of them are just having lunch," he thought. "The table is spread with a snowy white table cloth, and the cook brings in the dishes — Chinese food. 'Twenty-five catties.' Of what? Never mind. Why should it be Chinese food? Westerners say Chinese cooking is the most progressive, the best to eat, the most hygienic; so they eat Chinese food. The first dish is brought in, but what is this first dish? . . ."

"Firewood. . . ."

He turned his head with a start, to see standing on his left the mistress of his own family, her two gloomy eyes fastened on his face.

"What?" He spoke rather indignantly, feeling that her coming disturbed his work.

"The firewood is all used up, so today I have bought some more. Last time it was still two hundred and forty cash for ten catties, but today he wants two hundred and sixty. Suppose I give him two hundred and fifty?"

"All right, two hundred and fifty, let it be."

"He has weighed it very unfairly. He insists that there are twenty-four and a half catties, but suppose I count it as twenty-three and a half?"

"All right. Count it as twenty-three and a half catties."

"Then, five fives are twenty-five, three fives are fifteen. . . ."

"Oh, five fives are twenty-five, three fives are fifteen. . . ." He could get no further either, but after stopping for a moment suddenly took up his pen and started working out a sum on the lined paper on which he had written "A Happy Family." After working at it for some time he raised his head to say:

"Five hundred and eighty cash."

"In that case I haven't got enough here; I am still eighty or ninety short. . . ."

He pulled open the drawer of the desk, took out all the money in it — somewhere between twenty and thirty coppers — and put it in her outstretched hand. Then he watched her go out, and finally turned back to the desk. His head seemed to be bursting as if filled to the brim with sharp faggots. Five fives are twenty-five — scattered Arabic numerals were still imprinted on his brain. He gave a long sigh and breathed out again deeply, as if by this means he might expel the firewood, the "five fives are twenty-five," and the Arabic numerals which had stuck in his head. Sure enough, after breathing out his heart seemed much lighter, whereupon he started thinking vaguely again:

"What dish? It doesn't matter, so long as it is something out of the way. Fried pork or prawns' roe and sea-slugs are really too common. I must have them eating 'Dragon and Tiger.' But what is that exactly? Some people say it's made of snakes and cats, and is an upper-class Guangdong dish, only eaten at

big feasts. But I've seen the name on the menu in a Jiangsu restaurant; still, Jiangsu people aren't supposed to eat snakes or cats, so it must be, as someone else said, made of frogs and eels. Now what part of the country shall this couple be from? Never mind. After all, people from any part of the country can eat a dish of snake and cat (or frog and eel), without injuring their Happy Family. At any rate, this first dish is to be 'Dragon and Tiger'; there can be no question about that.

"Now that this bowl of 'Dragon and Tiger' is placed in the middle of the table, they take up their chopsticks simultaneously, point to the dish, smile sweetly at each other and say, in a foreign tongue:

" 'Chérie, s'il vous plaît!'

" 'Voulez-vous commencer, chéri!'

" 'Mais non, après vous!'

"Then they reach out their chopsticks simultaneously, and simultaneously take a morsel of snake — no, no, snake's flesh really sounds too peculiar; it would be better after all to say a morsel of eel. It is settled then that 'Dragon and Tiger' is made of frogs and eels. They pick out two morsels of eel simultaneously, exactly the same size. Five fives are twenty-five, three fives. . . . Never mind. And simultaneously put them in their mouths. . . ." Against his will he wanted to turn round, because he was conscious of a good deal of excitement behind him, and considerable coming and going. But he persevered, and pursued his train of thought distractedly:

"This seems rather sentimental; no family would behave like this. Whatever makes me so woolly-minded? I'm afraid this good subject will never be written up. . . . Or perhaps there is no need to have returned students; people who have received higher education in China would do just as well. They are both university graduates, the cultured élite, the élite. . . . The man is a writer; the woman is also a writer, or else a lover of literature. Or else the woman is a poetess; the man is a lover of poetry, a respecter of womanhood. Or else. . . ."

Finally he could contain himself no longer, and turned round.

Beside the bookcase behind him had appeared a mound of

cabbages, three at the bottom, two above, and one at the top, confronting him like a large letter A.

"Oh!" He started and gave a sigh, feeling his cheeks burn, while prickles ran up and down his spine. "Ah!" He took a very deep breath to get rid of the prickly feeling in his spine, then went on thinking, "The house of the Happy Family must have plenty of rooms. There is a store-room where things like cabbages are put. The master's study is apart, its walls lined with bookshelves; there are naturally no cabbages there. The shelves are filled with Chinese books and foreign books, including of course *An Ideal Husband* — two copies altogether. There is a separate bedroom, a brass bedstead, or something simpler like one of the elmwood beds made by the convicts of Number One Prison would do equally well. Beneath the bed is very clean. . . ." He glanced beneath his own bed; the firewood had all been used up, and there was only a piece of straw rope left, still coiling there like a dead snake.

"Twenty-three and a half catties. . . ." He felt that the firewood was just about to pour in in a never-ending stream under his bed, and his head ached again, so he got up quickly and went to the door to close it. But he had scarcely put his hand on the door when he felt that this was overhasty and let it go instead, dropping the door curtain that was thick with dust. At the same time he thought, "This method avoids the severity of shutting oneself in, as well as the discomfort of keeping the door open; it is quite in keeping with the *Doctrine of the Mean*.*

". . . So the master's study door is always closed." He walked back, sat down and thought, "Anyone with business must first knock at the door, and have his permission to come in; that is really the only thing to be done. Now suppose the master is sitting in his study and the mistress comes to discuss literature, she knocks too. . . . At least of this one can be assured — she will not bring in any cabbages.

" 'Entrez, chérie, s'il vous plaît!'

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* A Confucian classic advocating the principle of moderation in all things.

"But what happens when the master has no time to discuss literature? Does he ignore her, hearing her stand outside tapping gently on the door? That probably wouldn't do. Maybe it is all described in *An Ideal Husband* — that must really be an excellent novel. If I get paid for this article I must buy a copy to read!"

Slap!

His back stiffened, because he knew from experience that this slapping sound was made by his wife's hand striking their three-year-old daughter's head.

"In a Happy Family . . ." he thought, his back still rigid, hearing the child sobbing, "children are born late, yes, born late. Or perhaps it would be better to have none at all, just two people without any ties. . . . Or it might be better to stay in a hotel and let them look after everything, a single man without. . . ." Hearing the sound of sobbing increasing in volume, he stood up and brushed past the curtain, thinking, "Karl Marx wrote his *Das Kapital* while his children were crying around him. He must really have been a great man. . . ." He walked out, opened the outer door, and was assailed by a strong smell of kerosene. The child was lying to the right of the door, face downwards. As soon as she saw him she started crying aloud.

"There, there, all right! Don't cry, don't cry! There's a good girl." He bent down to pick her up. Having picked her up he turned round to see his wife standing furiously to the left of the door, also with a rigid back, her hands on her hips as if she were preparing to start physical exercises.

"Even you have to come and bully me! You can't help, you only make trouble — even the kerosene lamp had to turn over. What shall we light this evening? . . ."

"There, there, all right! Don't cry, don't cry!" Ignoring his wife's trembling tones, he carried the child into the house, and stroked her head. "There's a good girl," he repeated. Then he put her down, pulled out a chair and sat down. Setting her between his knees, he raised his hand. "Don't cry, there's a

good girl," he said. "Daddy will do 'Pussy Washing' for you." At the same time he craned his neck, licked his palms from a distance twice, then with them traced circles towards his face.

"Aha! Pussy!" She started laughing.

"That's right, that's right. Pussy." He traced several more circles, and then stopped, seeing her smiling at him with tears still in her eyes. It struck him suddenly that her sweet, innocent face was just like her mother's five years ago, especially her bright red lips, although the general outline was smaller. That had been another bright winter's day when she heard his decision to overcome all obstacles and sacrifice everything for her; when she too looked at him in the same way, smiling, with tears in her eyes. He sat down disconsolately, as if a little drunk.

"Ah, sweet lips," he thought.

The door curtain was suddenly fastened back and the firewood brought in.

Then, suddenly coming to himself again, he saw that the child, still with tears in her eyes, was looking at him with her bright red lips parted. "Lips. . . ." He glanced sidewards to where the firewood was being brought in. ". . . Probably it will be nothing but five fives are twenty-five, nine nines are eighty-one, all over again! . . . And two gloomy eyes. . . ." So thinking he snatched up the green-lined paper with the heading and the figures written on it, crumpled it up and then unfolded it again to wipe her eyes and nose. "Good girl, run along and play by yourself." He pushed her away as he spoke, at the same time throwing the ball of paper into the waste-paper basket.

But at once he felt rather sorry for the child, and, turning his head, followed her with his eyes as she walked forlornly away, while his ears were filled with the sound of firewood. Determined to concentrate, he turned back again and closed his eyes to put a stop to all distracting thoughts, sitting there quietly and peacefully.

He saw passing before him a flat, round, black-freckled flower with an orange centre, which floated from the left of his left eye right over to the opposite side where it disappeared; then a bright green flower, with a dark green centre; and finally a pile of six cabbages which formed themselves before him into an enormous letter A.

March 19, 1924

SOAP

With her back to the north window in the slanting sunlight, Siming's wife was pasting paper coins for the dead with her eight-year-old daughter, Xiu'er, when she heard the slow, heavy footsteps of someone in cloth shoes and knew her husband was back. She paid no attention, though, simply went on pasting coins. But the tread of cloth shoes drew nearer and nearer, till it finally stopped beside her. Then she could not help looking up to see Siming before her, hunching his shoulders and stooping forward to fumble desperately under his cloth jacket in the inner pocket of his long gown.

By dint of twisting and turning he extracted his hand at last with a small oblong package in it, which he handed to his wife. As she took it, she smelt an indefinable fragrance rather reminiscent of olive. On the green paper wrapper was a bright golden seal with a network of tiny designs. Xiu'er bounded forward to seize this and look at it, but her mother promptly pushed her aside.

"Been shopping? . . ." she asked as she looked at it.

"Er — yes." He stared at the package in her hand.

The green paper wrapper was opened. Inside was a layer of tissue paper, also a palm-leaf-green, and not till this was unwrapped was the object itself exposed — glossy and hard, besides being palm-leaf-green, with another network of fine designs on it. The tissue paper was a cream colour, it appeared. The indefinable fragrance rather reminiscent of olive was stronger now.

"My, this is really good soap!"

She held the soap to her nose as gingerly as if it were a child, and sniffed at it as she spoke.

"Er — yes. Just use this in future. . . ."

As he spoke, she noticed him eyeing her neck, and felt herself flushing up to her cheekbones. Sometimes when she rubbed her neck, especially behind the ears, her fingers detected a roughness; and though she knew this was the accumulated dirt of many years, she had never given it much thought. Now, under his scrutiny, she could not help blushing as she looked at this green, foreign soap with the curious scent, and this blush spread right to the tips of her ears. She mentally resolved to have a thorough wash with this soap after supper.

"There are places you can't wash clean just with honey locust pods,"* she muttered to herself.

"Ma, can I have this?" As Xiu'er reached out for the palm-leaf-green paper, Zhao'er, the younger daughter who had been playing outside, came running in too. Mrs. Siming promptly pushed them both aside, folded the tissue paper in place, wrapped the green paper round it as before, then leant over to put it on the highest shelf of the wash-stand. After one final glance, she turned back to her paper coins.

"Xuecheng!" Siming seemed to have remembered something. He gave a long-drawn-out shout, sitting down on a high-backed chair opposite his wife.

"Xuecheng!" she helped him call.

She stopped pasting coins to listen, but not a sound could she hear. When she saw him with upturned head waiting so impatiently, she felt quite apologetic.

"Xuecheng!" she called shrilly at the top of her voice.

This call indeed proved effective, for they heard the tramp of leather shoes draw near, and Xuecheng was standing before her. He was in shirt sleeves, and his plump round face was shiny with perspiration.

"What were you doing?" she asked disapprovingly. "Why didn't you hear your father call?"

"I was practising Hexagram Boxing. . . ." He turned at once

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* In many parts of China, honey locust pods were used for washing. They were cheaper than soap, but not so effective.

to his father and straightened up, looking at him as if to ask what he wanted.

"Xuecheng, I want to ask you the meaning of *o-du-fu*."*

"*O-du-fu*? . . . Isn't it a very fierce woman?"

"What nonsense! The idea!" Siming was suddenly furious. "Am I a woman, pray?"

Xuecheng recoiled two steps, and stood straighter than ever. Though his father's gait sometimes reminded him of the way old men walked in Beijing opera, he had never considered Siming as a woman. His answer, he saw now, had been a great mistake.

"As if I didn't know *o-du-fu* means a very fierce woman. Would I have to ask *you* that? — This isn't Chinese, it's foreign devils' language, I'm telling you. What does it mean, do you know?"

"I . . . I don't know." Xuecheng felt even more uneasy.

"Pah! What use is it my spending all that money to send you to school if you don't even understand a little thing like this? Your school boasts that it lays equal stress on speech and comprehension, yet it hasn't taught you anything. The ones speaking this devils' language couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen, actually a little younger than you, yet they were chattering away in it, while you can't even tell me the meaning. And you have the face to answer 'I don't know.' Go and look it up for me at once!"

"Yes," answered Xuecheng deep down in his throat, then respectfully withdrew.

"I don't know what students today are coming to," declared Siming with emotion after a pause. "As a matter of fact, in the time of Guang Xu,** I was all in favour of opening schools; but I never foresaw how great the evils would be. What 'emancipation' and 'freedom' have we had? There is no true learning, nothing but absurdities. I've spent quite a bit of money on Xuecheng, all to no purpose. It wasn't easy to get him into

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* In Chinese this means "vicious wife."

** I.e., 1875-1908.

this half-Western, half-Chinese school, where they claim they lay equal stress on 'speaking and comprehending English.'* You'd think all should be well. But — bah! — after one whole year of study he can't even understand *o-du-fu*! He must still be studying dead books. What use is such a school, I ask you? What I say is: Close the whole lot of them!"

"Yes, really, better close the whole lot of them," chimed in his wife sympathetically, pasting away at the paper money.

"There's no need for Xiu'er and her sister to attend any school. 'What's the good of girls studying?' as Ninth Grandpa said. When he opposed girls' schools I attacked him for it; but now I see the old folk were right after all. Just think, it's already in very poor taste the way women wander up and down the streets, and now they want to cut their hair as well. Nothing disgusts me so much as these short-haired schoolgirls. What I say is: There's some excuse for soldiers and bandits, but these girls are the ones who turn everything upside-down. They ought to be very severely dealt with indeed. . . ."

"Yes, as if it wasn't enough for all men to look like monks, the women are imitating nuns."**

"Xuecheng!"

Xuecheng hurried in holding a small, fat, gilt-edged book, which he handed to his father.

"This looks like it," he said, pointing to one place. "Here. . . ."

Siming took it and looked at it. He knew it was a dictionary, but the characters were very small and horizontally printed too. He turned frowning towards the window, and screwed up his eyes to read the passage Xuecheng had pointed out.

" 'A society founded in the eighteenth century for mutual relief.' — No, that can't be it. — How do you pronounce this?" He pointed at the devils' word in front.

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* English was taught in nearly all the new schools at that time, and learning to speak was considered as important as learning to read.

** Monks and nuns in China shaved their heads. Hence, at the end of the Qing Dynasty and later, conservatives laughed at the men who cut their queues, claiming they looked like monks.

"Odd fellows."

"No, no, that wasn't it." Siming suddenly lost his temper again. "I told you it was bad language, a swear-word of some sort, to abuse someone of my type. Understand? Go and look it up!"

Xuecheng glanced at him several times, but did not move.

"This is too puzzling. How can he make head or tail of it? You must explain things clearly to him first, before he can look it up properly." Seeing Xuecheng in a quandary, his mother felt sorry for him and intervened rather indignantly on his behalf.

"It was when I was buying soap at Guang Run Xiang on the main street," sighed Siming, turning to her. "There were three students shopping there too. Of course, to them I must have seemed a little pernickety. I looked at five or six kinds of soap all over forty cents, and turned them down. Then I looked at some priced ten cents a cake, but it was too poor, with no scent at all. Since I thought it best to strike a happy mean, I chose that green soap at twenty-four cents a cake. The assistant was one of these supercilious young fellows with eyes on the top of his head, so he pulled a long dog's face. At that those impudent students started winking at each other and talking devils' language. Then I wanted to unwrap the soap and look at it before paying — for with all that foreign paper round it, how could I tell whether it was good or bad? But that supercilious young fellow not only refused, but was very unreasonable and passed some offensive remarks, at which those whipper-snappers laughed. It was the youngest of the lot who said that, looking straight at me, and the rest of them started laughing. So it must have been some bad word." He turned back to Xuecheng. "Look for it in the section headed Bad Language!"

"Yes," answered Xuecheng deep down in his throat, then respectfully withdrew.

"Yet they still shout 'New Culture! New Culture!' when the world's in such a state! Isn't this bad enough?" His eyes on the rafters, he went on. "The students have no morals, society has no morals. Unless we find some panacea, China will

really be finished. Look, how pathetic that was!"

"What?" asked his wife casually, not really curious.

"A filial daughter. . . ." His eyes came round to her, and there was respect in his voice. "There were two beggars on the main street. One was a girl who looked eighteen or nineteen. Actually, it's most improper to beg at that age, but beg she did. She was with an old woman of about seventy, who had white hair and was blind. They were begging under the eaves of that clothes shop, and everybody said how filial she was. The old one was her grandmother. Whatever trifle the girl received, she gave it to her grandmother, choosing to go hungry herself. But do you think people would give alms to even such a filial daughter?"

He fixed her with his eye, as if to test her intelligence.

She made no answer, but fixed him with *her* eye, as if waiting for him to elucidate.

"Bah — no!" He supplied the answer himself at last. "I watched for a long time, and saw one person only give her a copper. Plenty of others had gathered round, but only to jeer at them. There were two low types as well, one of whom had the impertinence to say:

" 'Afa! Don't be put off by the dirt on this piece of goods. If you buy two cakes of soap and give her a good scrubbing, the result won't be bad at all!' Think, what a way to talk!"

She snorted and lowered her head. After quite a time, she asked rather casually, "Did *you* give her any money?"

"Did I? — No. I'd have felt ashamed to give just one or two coins. She wasn't an ordinary beggar, you know. . . ."

"Mm." Without waiting for him to finish she stood up slowly and walked to the kitchen. Dusk was gathering, and it was time for supper.

Siming stood up too, and walked into the courtyard. It was lighter out than in. Xuecheng was practising Hexagram Boxing in a corner by the wall. This constituted his "home education," and he used the economical method of employing the hour between day and night for this purpose. Xuecheng had been boxing now for about half a year. Siming nodded very slightly, as

if in approval, then began to pace the courtyard with his hands behind his back. Before long, the broad leaves of the evergreen which was the only potted plant they had were swallowed up in the darkness, and stars twinkled between white clouds which looked like torn cotton. Night had fallen. Siming could not repress his growing indignation. He felt called on to do great deeds, to declare war on all the bad students around and on this wicked society. By degrees he grew bolder and bolder, his steps became longer and longer, and the thud of his cloth soles grew louder and louder, waking the hen and her chicks in the coop so that they cheeped in alarm.

A light appeared in the hall — the signal that supper was ready — and the whole household gathered round the table in the middle. The lamp stood at the lower end of the table, while Siming sat alone at the head. His plump, round face was like Xuecheng's, with the addition of two sparse whiskers. Seen through the hot vapour from the vegetable soup, he looked like the God of Wealth you find in temples. On the left sat Mrs. Siming and Zhao'er, on the right Xuecheng and Xiu'er. Chopsticks pattered like rain against the bowls. Though no one said a word, their supper table was very animated.

Zhao'er upset her bowl, spilling soup over half the table. Siming opened his narrow eyes as wide as he could. Only when he saw she was going to cry did he stop glaring at her and reach out with his chopsticks for a tender morsel of cabbage he had spotted. But the tender morsel had disappeared. He looked right and left, and discovered Xuecheng on the point of stuffing it into his wide-open mouth. Disappointed, he ate a mouthful of yellowish leaves instead.

"Xuecheng!" He looked at his son. "Have you found that phrase or not?"

"Which phrase? — No, not yet!"

"Pah! Look at you, not a good student and with no sense either — all you can do is eat! You should learn from that filial daughter: although she's a beggar, she still treats her grandmother very respectfully, even if it means going hungry herself.

But what do you impudent students know of such things? You'll grow up like those low types. . . ."

"I've thought of one possibility, but I don't know if it's right. . . . I think, perhaps, they may have said *o-du-fu-la.*"*

"That's right! That's it exactly! That's exactly the sound it was: *o-du-fu-la.* What does that mean? You belong to the same group: you must know."

"Mean? — I'm not sure what it means."

"Nonsense. Don't try to deceive me. You're all a bad lot."

" 'Even thunder won't strike folk at a meal,' " burst out Mrs. Siming suddenly. "Why do you keep losing your temper today? Even at supper you can't stop hitting the hen while pointing at the dog. What do boys that age understand?"

"What?" Siming was on the point of answering back when he saw her sunken cheeks were quivering with anger, her colour had changed, and a fearful glint had come into her triangular eyes. He hastily changed his tune. "I've not been losing my temper. I'm just telling Xuecheng to learn a little sense."

"How can he understand what's in *your* mind?" She looked angrier than ever. "If he had any sense, he'd long since have lit a lantern or a torch and gone out to fetch that filial daughter. You've already bought her one cake of soap: all you have to do is buy another. . . ."

"Nonsense! That's what that low type said."

"I'm not so sure. If you buy another cake and give her a good scrubbing, then worship her, the whole world will be at peace."

"How can you say such a thing? What connection is there? Because I remembered you'd no soap. . . ."

"There's a connection all right. You bought it specially for the filial daughter; so go and give her a good scrubbing. I don't deserve it. I don't want it. I don't want to share her glory."

"Really, how can you talk like that?" mumbled Siming. "You women. . . ." His face was perspiring like Xuecheng's after

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* Chinese transliteration of "old fool."

Hexagram Boxing, probably mostly because the food had been so hot.

"What about us women? We women are much better than you men. If you men aren't cursing eighteen- or nineteen-year-old girl students, you're praising eighteen- or nineteen-year-old girl beggars: such dirty minds you have! Scrubbing, indeed! — Disgusting!"

"Didn't you hear? That was one of those low types. . . ."

"Siming!" A thundering voice was heard from the darkness outside.

"Daotong? I'm coming!"

Siming knew this was Ho Daotong, famed for his powerful voice, and he shouted back as joyfully as a criminal newly reprieved.

"Xuecheng, hurry up and light the lamp to show Uncle Ho into the library!"

Xuecheng lit a candle, and ushered Daotong into a room on the west. They were followed by Bu Weiyuan.

"I'm sorry I didn't welcome you. Excuse me." With his mouth still full of rice, Siming came in and bowed with clasped hands in greeting. "Won't you join us at our simple meal? . . ."

"We've already eaten," Weiyuan stepped forward and greeted him. "We've hurried here at this time of night because of the eighteenth essay and poem contest of the Moral Rearmament Literary League. Isn't tomorrow the seventeenth?"

"What? Is it the sixteenth today?" asked Siming in surprise.

"See how absent-minded you are!" boomed Daotong.

"So we'll have to send something in tonight to the newspaper office, to make sure they print it tomorrow."

"I've already drafted the title of the essay. See whether you think it will do or not." As he was speaking, Daotong produced a slip of paper from his handkerchief and handed it to Siming.

Siming stepped up to the candle, unfolded the paper, and read it word by word, " 'We humbly suggest an essay in the name of the whole nation to beg the President to issue an order for the promotion of the Confucian classics and the worship of

the mother of Mencius,* in order to revive this moribund world and preserve our national character.' Very good. Very good. Isn't it a little long, though?"

"That doesn't matter," answered Daotong loudly. "I've worked it out, and it won't cost more to advertise. But what about the title for the poem?"

"The title for the poem?" Siming suddenly looked most respectful. "I've thought of one. How about 'The Filial Daughter'? It's a true story, and she deserves to be eulogized. On the main street today. . . ."

"Oh, no, that won't do," put in Weiyuan hastily, waving his hand to stop Siming. "I saw her too. She isn't from these parts, and I couldn't understand her dialect, nor she mine. I don't know where she's from. Everyone says she's filial; but when I asked her if she could write poems, she shook her head. If she could, that would be fine."**

"But since loyalty and filial piety are so important, it doesn't matter too much if she can't write poems. . . ."

"That isn't true. Quite otherwise." Weiyuan raised his hands and rushed towards Siming, to shake and push him. "She'd only be interesting if she could write poems."

"Let's use this title." Siming pushed him aside. "Add an explanation and print it. In the first place, it will serve to eulogize her; in the second, we can use this to criticize society. What is the world coming to anyway? I watched for some time, and didn't see anybody give her a cent — aren't people utterly heartless?"

"*Aiya*, Siming!" Weiyuan rushed over again. "You're cursing baldheads to a monk. I didn't give her anything because I didn't happen to have any money on me."

"Don't be so sensitive, Weiyuan." Siming pushed him aside again. "Of course you're an exception. Let me finish. There

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* A woman famous for her virtue. According to tradition, she moved house three times to avoid undesirable companions for her son.

** In old China, it was considered romantic for women to exchange ideas with men through the medium of poems.

was quite a crowd around them, showing no respect, just jeering. There were two low types as well, who were even more impertinent. One of them said, 'Afa! If you buy two cakes of soap and give her a good scrubbing, the result won't be bad at all!' Just think. . . ."

"Ha, ha! Two cakes of soap!" Daotong suddenly bellowed with laughter, nearly splitting their ear-drums. "Buy soap! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Daotong! Daotong! Don't make such a noise!" Siming gave a start, panic-stricken.

"A good scrubbing! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Daotong!" Siming looked stern. "We're discussing serious matters. Why should you make such a noise, nearly deafening everyone? Listen to me: we'll use both these titles, and send them straight to the newspaper office so that they come out without fail tomorrow. I'll have to trouble you both to take them there."

"All right, all right. Of course," agreed Weiyuan readily.

"Ha, ha! A good scrubbing! Ho, ho!"

"Daotong!" shouted Siming, furious.

This shout made Daotong stop laughing. After they had drawn up the explanation, Weiyuan copied it on the paper and left with Daotong for the newspaper office. Siming carried the candle to see them out, then walked back to the door of the hall feeling rather apprehensive. After some hesitation, though, he finally crossed the threshold. As he went in, his eyes fell on the small, green, oblong package of soap in the middle of the central table, the gold characters on it glittering in the lamplight, with fine designs around them.

Xiu'er and Zhao'er were playing on the floor at the lower end of the table, while Xuecheng sat on the right side looking up something in his dictionary. Last of all, on the high-backed chair in the shadows far from the lamp, Siming discovered his wife. Her impassive face showed neither joy nor anger, and she was staring at nothing.

"A good scrubbing indeed! Disgusting!"

Faintly, Siming heard Xiu'er's voice behind him. He turned, but she was not moving. Only Zhao'er had put both small hands to her face as if to shame somebody.

This was no place for him. He blew out the candle, and went into the yard to pace up and down. And, because he forgot to be quiet, the mother hen and her chicks started cheeping again. At once he walked more lightly, moving further away. After a long time, the lamp in the hall was transferred to the bedroom. The moonlight on the ground was like seamless white gauze, and the moon — quite full — seemed a jade disc among the bright clouds.

He felt not a little depressed, as if he, like the filial daughter, was "utterly forlorn and alone." That night he slept very late.

By the next morning, however, the soap was being honoured by being used. Getting up later than usual, he saw his wife leaning over the wash-stand rubbing her neck, with bubbles like those emitted by great crabs heaped up over both her ears. The difference between these and the small white bubbles produced by honey locust pods was like that between heaven and earth. After this, an indefinable fragrance rather reminiscent of olive always emanated from Mrs. Siming. Not for nearly half a year did this suddenly give place to another scent, which all who smelt it averred was like sandalwood.

March 22, 1924

THE LAMP THAT WAS KEPT ALIGHT

One overcast spring afternoon the atmosphere was somewhat tense in the one and only tea-house of Lucky Light Village, for in the customers' ears lingered the faint yet earnest cry:

"Put it out!"

This was not true of everyone in the village, of course. The villagers here were a stay-at-home lot, who before stirring abroad would look up the almanac to see whether that day was "propitious for a journey" or not. If it was, before setting out they would step in the direction of the God of Luck to be sure of meeting with good fortune. Sitting here so free from constraint in the tea-house were merely a few youths who prided themselves on their broad-mindedness, although in conservative eyes each mother's son among them was bound to be the ruin of his family.

The atmosphere was somewhat tense now in this tea-house.

"Still no change?" asked Triangle Face, picking up his bowl of tea.

"Still no change, they say," replied Square Head. "He keeps repeating, 'Put it out, put it out!' His eyes are flashing worse than ever. The devil! Don't think it's a joke — the fellow's a menace to our village. Fact is, we ought to find some way to get rid of him!"

"Get rid of him, by all means. He's nothing but a dirty bastard. When the temple was built his ancestors paid their share, yet now he wants to blow out the temple light! Is that unfilial or isn't it? Let's send him to the county court as an unfilial son!" Kuoting ended with a flourish, smashing his fist on the table. The tilted lid of one bowl fell off with a clatter.

"That won't do. Only parents or maternal uncles can charge an undutiful son. . . ." objected Square Head.

"Pity all he has is a paternal uncle. . . ." Kuoting's spirits immediately sank.

"Kuoting!" cried Square Head suddenly. "Did you have much luck in your game yesterday?"

Kuoting stared at him round-eyed but did not answer. Fatfaced Zhuang Qiguang was already bellowing:

"If he puts out the lamp that'll be the end of Lucky Light Village, won't it? Don't all the old folk say this lamp was lit by Emperor Wu of Liang, and it's been burning ever since? Not even the Long Hairs. . . .* Just look, ha! at that splendid green light it sheds! Folk from other parts passing this way always ask to see it and admire it. . . . It's something to be proud of. . . . What does he mean by carrying on like this? . . ."

"He's crazy. Didn't you know?" Square Head spoke scornfully. "Bah, you're so clever!" Zhuang's fat face glistened with sweat.

"I say, trick him again in the old way." Huiwu's wife, proprietor-cum-waitress of this tea-house, had been no more than a listener hitherto; but at this digression from a topic which enthralled her she hastily intervened to prevent a quarrel and lead them back to the subject.

"What old way?" asked Zhuang in surprise.

"Didn't he go crazy, just like this, once before? That was in his father's time. After being tricked, he recovered."

"Tricked — how? Why did I never hear of it?" asked Zhuang in even greater surprise.

"How could you? You were just brats at the time, guzzling your mammy's milk. I wasn't like this either, I'd have you know. You should have seen my hands in those days, so smooth and soft and white. . . ."

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* The Taiping revolutionaries of the mid-nineteenth century, who wore their hair loose as a protest against the queues imposed by the Qing rulers.

"You're still smooth and soft and white. . . ." interposed Square Head.

"Get away with you!" Her glare turned into a smile. "Enough of your nonsense! Let's be serious. He was young then and his father was a little crazy too. They say one day his grandfather took him to the temple and told him to bow to Old Man Earth, General Plague and Guardian Angel Wang, but instead he ran off in a fright and he's been odd ever since, just the way he is now. He talks to everyone he meets about blowing out the lamp that's always kept alight in the main hall. Once it's blown out there'll be no more locusts or plagues, he says, as if that would be such a wonderful thing. Most likely he's possessed by some devil that's afraid of seeing true gods. Which of us is afraid of Old Man Earth? Is your tea cold? Let me add some hot water. There! Yes, after that he rushed in to blow it out. His father was too fond of him to lock him up. But that provoked the whole village, and folk kept after his father. Still no one knew what to do. Thank goodness my old man was still alive in those days to work out a plan. He blacked out the lamp with a cotton quilt, then took him to see it and told him it had been put out!"

"My, my! That took some thinking out!" Triangle Face heaved an admiring sigh.

"Why go to all that trouble?" growled Kuoting. "A bastard like that should be beaten to death — good riddance!"

"What an idea!" Staring at him in horror, she made a sign of dissent. "The idea! Didn't his grandfather hold an official rank?"

Kuoting and the rest eyed each other, unable to improve on her old man's plan.

"That cured him!" Brushing the spittle from her mouth with the back of one hand, she went on even faster. "That cured him completely! He's never crossed the temple threshold again or said a word about the lamp all these years. I don't know what sent him off his head again a few days after the last temple fair. It's exactly the same as last time, that I know. Soon after noon he passed this way, going to the temple no doubt.

Go and talk it over with Fourth Master and see if you can't trick him again. Wasn't that lamp lit by Emperor Wu of Liang? Don't they say that if it goes out this village will become a sea and we'll all change into eels? Do go on and talk it over with Fourth Master. . . ."

"We'd better have a look at the temple first," said Square Head striding out.

Kuoting and Zhuang Qiguang followed him. Triangle Face, the last, turned at the door to say:

"Score it up to me today, dammit! . . ."

Huiwu's wife, assenting, picked up a piece of charcoal from the floor. On the east wall, under a small triangle with a cluster of short lines beneath it, she drew two more lines.

Looking towards the temple, sure enough, they saw a small group gathered: the fellow himself, two onlookers, three children.

But the temple gate was shut tight.

"Good! The temple gate's still closed," said Kuoting approvingly.

Their approach apparently gave the children courage, for they closed in. He had been standing in front of the temple gate, but now he turned to regard them over his shoulder.

He seemed the same as usual with his sallow, square face and shabby blue cotton gown, except that his large, almond eyes shone under their shaggy brows with a strange light and he stared at them unwinking for some moments, grief, suspicion and fear in his gaze. Two straws were sticking to his short hair, no doubt thrown by the children behind his back, for each time they looked at his head they hunched their shoulders and grinned, sticking out their tongues.

They all stood still, eyeing each other.

"What are you up to?" It was Triangle Face who finally stepped forward to put this question.

"I've asked Old Hei to open the gate," his voice was low and gentle. "Because that lamp has got to be blown out. You see, they should all be put out: Blue Face with his three

heads and six arms, Three Eyes, Long Hat, Half Head, Ox Head and Swine Tusk. . . . Out with the lot of them! When they're out we shall have no more locusts, no more plague. . . ."

"Hee-hee! Nonsense!" Kuoting tittered scornfully. "If you blow out that lamp there'll be even more locusts, you'll catch the plague yourself!"

"Hee-hee!" tittered Zhuang Qiguang.

A child, clothed only in a pair of pants, held up the reed he was playing with and aimed it at him, parting small cherry lips to cry:

"Bang!"

"Go on home now!" said Kuoting loudly. "If you don't your uncle will break your bones! We'll blow out the lamp for you. You can come back in a few days and see for yourself."

His gaze glittered even more brightly as he looked Kuoting in the eye, forcing Kuoting to turn his eyes away.

"*You'll* blow it out?" With a contemptuous smile he went on firmly, "Not you! I don't need any of you. I'll do it myself. I'm going to blow it out now!"

Kuoting was promptly reduced to the state of collapse that follows a bout of drinking. But Square Head had stepped forward to say slowly:

"You've always shown yourself an intelligent man, but this is ridiculous! Let me tell you something you should be able to grasp. Even if the lamp's blown out, those creatures will still be there, won't they? Stop playing the fool and go home! Go and have some sleep!"

"I know they'll still be there if it's blown out." He flashed them another grim smile before regaining his gravity and proceeding earnestly, "I shall just be doing the best I can. I'm tackling this first because it's easiest. I'm going to blow it out now, I'll do it myself!" He turned back to batter at the temple gate.

"Hey!" Kuoting was angry. "Don't you belong to this village? Do you want us all to turn into eels? Go home! You can't push that door open, you've no way of opening it! You can't blow out the lamp — go on home!"

"I'm not going home. I'm going to blow it out."

"Not you! You can't get in!"

"..."

"You can't get in!"

"I'll think of some other way then," he said gravely, turning to eye them intently.

"Ha, let's see what other way you have."

"..."

"Let's see what other way you have!"

"I'll set the place on fire."

"What?" Kuoting could hardly believe his ears.

"I'll set the place on fire!"

The silence was like a clear chime which died away so slowly that all living creatures near by were held motionless. But presently they started whispering together, and presently they withdrew. Two or three halted at a distance. Outside the back gate of the temple, Zhuang Qiguang shouted:

"Old Hei! Watch out! Keep the temple gates closed tight! Do you hear me, Old Hei? Close them tight. We'll come back when we've decided what to do!"

But he, seemingly oblivious of all else, flashed his blazing eyes as if searching the earth, the air and men's bodies for the wherewithal to kindle a fire.

After Square Head and Kuoting had shuttled to and fro between some of the larger houses, the whole of Lucky Light Village was plunged in confusion. Many ears and hearts were filled with that fearful word "Fire!" This was not true, of course, of quite a few more conservative ears and hearts. Still there was an air of tension throughout the village, and all conscious of this tension felt as acutely uneasy as if at any moment they were liable to change into eels and the whole world to perish. Although they were vaguely aware that only Lucky Light Village was to perish, to them Lucky Light Village was the world.

The centre of all this activity soon shifted to Fourth Master's reception room. In the place of honour sat Old Guo, in the

fullness of years and virtue, his face as wrinkled as a wind-dried orange, plucking at the white hairs on his chin as if eager to pull them out.

"This forenoon," he declared slowly, releasing his beard, "when Old Fu in the west end had a stroke, his son said it was because the God of the Earth was displeased. That being so, in future, if by any chance something disturbing should happen, it is almost sure to affect you. Yes, you — most unfortunate."

"True." Fourth Master tugged casually and absent-mindedly at his grizzled moustache. "This is a judgment on his father's sins. My brother never believed in Buddha, did he? . . . I didn't agree with him, but what could I do? What do you expect me to do now?"

"To my mind, there is one way only. Only one. Tomorrow, tie him up, send him to town, and leave him in the big temple for one night — yes, for one night — to exorcize this evil spirit."

This was not merely the first time Kuoting and Square Head had entered this normally inaccessible room in their capacity as champions of the village, they were actually sitting below Old Guo yet above Fourth Master, and moreover had been offered tea. Having entered with Old Guo, after making their report they had confined themselves to sipping tea, not even opening their mouths when the tea was finished. But now, without warning, Kuoting voiced his opinion:

"That would take too long! The two of them are still there watching him. The main thing is to decide on immediate action. If he really starts a fire. . . ."

Old Guo jumped for fright and his jaw began to tremble.

"If he really starts a fire. . . ." chimed in Square Head.

"Well," said Kuoting loudly, "that would be the end!"

A brown-haired girl came in to fill their bowls. Kuoting subsided into silence, picking up his bowl immediately to drink. With a convulsive start he set it down, licking his upper lip, then removed the lid and blew on the tea to cool it.

"I hate being involved like this." Fourth Master drummed

softly on the table. "A son who's such a disgrace to his family would be better dead!" He sighed.

"That's true, he'd be better dead." Kuoting looked up. "Last year they killed one like him in Liange Village, a disgrace to his family. Everyone agreed to set on him together at the same instant, so that nobody could say who struck the first blow. And no trouble came of it."

"That was different," said Square Head. "This time the authorities are in charge. We must think quickly what to do. In my opinion. . . ."

Old Guo and Fourth Master solemnly studied his face.

"In my opinion, we'd better lock him up."

"That's a good idea." Fourth Master nodded slowly.

"Good," agreed Kuoting.

"That certainly is a good idea," drawled Old Guo. "We'll have him brought here now. We must make haste, here, to prepare a room. A padlock too."

"A room?" Fourth Master threw back his head to think. "I've no suitable room to spare here. Besides, we don't know how long he'll be in this state."

"Use his own. . . ." suggested Old Guo.

"Our Liushun is marrying this autumn." Suddenly Fourth Master sounded both stern and grieved, and his voice was trembling. ". . . What a nephew, long since past the age to marry, yet instead of founding a family and settling down, all he can do is go mad! My brother did his duty. He may not have been too good a citizen, but at least someone must continue the sacrifices to him. . . ."

"Yes, indeed!" said the other three together.

"When Liushun has sons, I shall let him adopt the second. But can you take someone else's son for nothing?"

"No, indeed!" said the other three together.

"This tumble-down house means nothing to me, and Liushun doesn't care about such things either. But will the child's mother be willing to give away her own flesh and blood for no return?"

"No, indeed!" said the other three together.

Fourth Master fell silent. The other three looked at each other.

"Every day I've been hoping for his recovery," resumed Fourth Master slowly after a pause. "But he doesn't get any better. It's not that he can't, he won't. There's nothing for it but to lock him up as this gentleman suggests, to keep him out of mischief, lest he disgrace his father. This may be just as well, we owe it to his father. . . ."

"Yes, of course," said Kuoting with emotion. "But what about a room? . . ."

"Aren't there spare rooms in the temple?" asked Fourth Master slowly.

"Yes!" Kuoting saw light. "There are! That room to the west as you go in is empty, and there's only a small square window with thick bars — he'll never get out of that. Just the thing!"

Old Guo and Square Head hastened to express their approval. Kuoting heaved a sigh and puckered his lips to sip tea.

Before dusk fell, peace reigned once more, or the matter was completely forgotten, for tense expressions had relaxed and the earlier signs of jubilation had vanished. Naturally there were more visitors to the temple than usual, but the number soon dwindled. Only the children who had been unable to play there for some days because the gates were closed found the temple yard a special attraction today. After supper several of them ran back there to play at riddles.

"You guess," said the biggest. "I'll say it once more:

Red oars, a snow-white boat,
I paddle across, then rest;
I eat a snack, then sing;
What am I — have you guessed?"

"Red oars — what are they?" asked one little girl.

"I'll tell you, it's a. . . ."

"Wait a bit!" begged one with a scabby head. "I know: a boat!"

"A boat!" repeated the boy wearing nothing but pants.

"A boat, eh?" said the biggest. "A boat is paddled, but can it sing? You'll never guess. I'll tell you. . . ."

"Wait a bit," begged Scabby Head.

"Bah, you'll never guess. I'll tell you. It's a goose."

"A goose!" The girl chuckled. "Red oars."

"Why a white boat?" asked the boy in nothing but pants.

"I'll set the place on fire!"

With a start the children remembered him and turned together to look at the west room, where they saw him clutching the window frame with one hand and tearing with the other at the bars, between which two bright eyes were flashing.

After a second's silence, Scabby Head rushed off with a shout, and laughing and shouting the others raced after him. The boy wearing nothing but pants pointed his reed over his shoulder and, parting his cherry lips, called out distinctly:

"Bang!"

Then all was utterly still. As the shades of night fell, the bright green altar lamp shone even more brightly on the gods on the dais and on the hall, shining into the yard and into the gloom behind the wooden bars.

After scampering out of the temple the children came to a halt. Holding hands, they sauntered slowly home, spluttering with laughter as they sang in chorus a song they had just made:

A white boat moors not far away.
I'll blow it out myself,
See if I don't!
Come on, come on and join our play!
I'm going to start a fire!
Oh, no, you won't!
Can you guess my riddle, pray?

March 1, 1925

A PUBLIC EXAMPLE

In a street in the west city of the model region,* nothing was stirring. Although the blazing sun was not yet directly overhead, the dust on the road already seemed to be glinting and fierce heat pervaded the air, making the might of high summer felt everywhere. The dogs' tongues were lolling out, even the crows on the trees were panting for breath — but naturally there were exceptions. From far away came the faint clash of two copper bowls,** turning people's thoughts to wild-plum juice and giving them a faint sensation of cool. However, the intervals between those lazy, monotonous clinks seemed to deepen the silence.

There was only the sound of footfalls as rickshaw men sped forward silently, as if in a hurry to escape the fierce sun overhead.

"Hot dumplings! Newly steamed. . . ."

A fat boy of eleven or twelve, eyes narrowed, mouth crooked, was calling out in front of a roadside shop. His voice was already hoarse and rather drowsy, as if the long summer day had made him sleepy. On the rickety table beside him sat two dozen steamed buns and dumplings, not steaming hot but stone cold.

"Hey! Steamed buns and dumplings, piping hot. . . ."

Suddenly, like a rubber ball rebounding from a wall, he flew across the road. By the telegraph pole opposite, facing the road, two men had halted. One, a scrawny policeman with a sallow face in a yellow uniform, had a sword at his

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* A sarcastic reference to Beijing. According to the *Han History*, "To establish a model, a start must be made in the capital."

** Used by vendors of wild-plum juice to attract customers.

waist. He was holding a rope, its other end tied round the arm of a man in a blue cotton gown and white sleeveless jerkin. His new straw hat, its brim turned down, covered his eyes. But Fat Boy was short, and when he looked up he met the prisoner's eyes. They seemed to be fixed on his head. He hastily lowered his eyes to look at the white jerkin, on which were lines of writing, large and small.

In a second, a semi-circle of onlookers gathered. After they were joined by an old bald-head, the little space left was promptly occupied by a bare-chested fat fellow with a red nose. Being outsize, he filled the place of two people, so that later arrivals could only form a second row to peer between the necks of those in front.

Baldy, standing almost directly opposite White Jerkin, stooped to study the characters written on his jerkin. Finally he read out:

"*Weng, du, heng, ba, er. . . .*"

Fat Boy saw that White Jerkin was studying that glistening bald-head, so he followed suit, but saw nothing remarkable apart from an oily scalp with a tuft of grey-white hair to the left of his ear. But an amah behind, who was carrying a child, tried to seize this chance to squeeze in. For fear of losing his place Baldy promptly straightened up, though he had not finished reading, and this forced him to look instead at White Jerkin's face: half a nose, a mouth and a pointed chin under the projecting brim of the straw hat.

Again, like a rubber ball rebounding from a wall, a small schoolboy rushed up, one hand holding on his snow-white cotton cap, and shoved his way through the crowd. But when he had shoved past three or four rows, he came up against something immovable and massive. Looking up he saw, above a pair of blue pants, a broad, bare back running with sweat. Knowing that there was no coping with this, he edged to the right and there, luckily, was a crack letting through the light. But as he prepared to butt his way through, he heard an exclamation and the seat of the trousers swivelled to the right. At once the space was blocked, the light blotted out.

However, soon the schoolboy squeezed his way out beside the policeman's sword. He gazed round in astonishment. Encircled by people, the prisoner was wearing a white jerkin. In front of him was a bare-chested fat boy, behind whom stood a bare-chested fat fellow with a red nose. He vaguely identified him with the huge obstacle he had come up against, and fixed amazed, admiring eyes on that red nose. Fat Boy was staring at Schoolboy's face. Unable to stand this scrutiny he turned his head towards a bulging breast with a few long hairs round the nipple.

"Hey, what has he done wrong? . . ."

All stared in astonishment as a rough fellow, who looked like a workman, asked Baldy this question in a low, diffident voice.

Baldy made no answer, simply glaring at him till he lowered his eyes. When presently he looked again, Baldy was still glaring at him, and so were all the others apparently. So, as flustered as if he himself had committed some crime, he slowly backed out and left. His place was taken by a tall fellow with an umbrella. Baldy turned back to look at White Jerkin.

Longfellow stooped to appraise White Jerkin's face beneath the drooping hat brim, then for some reason straightened up abruptly. Thereupon the people behind him were forced to crane their necks hard again, one lean fellow even gaping like a dead perch.

All of a sudden, the policeman raised one foot. Immediately everyone stared in stupefaction; but when he set it down steadily again, they went on watching White Jerkin. Longfellow stooped abruptly again to peer beneath the drooping brim of the straw hat, but promptly straightened up once more, raising one hand to scratch his head furiously.

Baldy was annoyed, first becoming aware of a commotion behind him, then hearing a champing beside his ear. Scowling, he looked round. A grimy hand close to his right side was stuffing a bun half the size of his fist into the mouth of a feline face. He said nothing, turning to look at White Jerkin's new straw hat.

Without warning, a clap like a thunderbolt made even outsize Fat Fellow stagger forward. The same instant, over his shoulder stretched an arm almost as fat as his own, five fingers outspread, and slapped Fat Boy's cheeks.

"Larking about, eh! Dammit!..." An even rounder fat face, like that of a Maitreya Buddha, loomed behind Fat Fellow.

Fat Boy also staggered four or five steps, but did not fall. One hand pressed to his cheek, he turned, as if to squeeze out through the space by Fat Fellow's leg. Fat Fellow promptly stood firm, swivelling his bottom to block the space.

"What the hell!" he growled.

Fat Boy panicked, like a mouse caught in a trap, then bolted across to Schoolboy, pushed him aside and charged out. Schoolboy turned and followed.

"Bah, boys...." complained half a dozen people.

When quiet was restored and Fat Fellow looked back at White Jerkin's face, he found the latter was looking up at his chest. He hastily lowered his head to eye it himself, but all he saw was sweat in the cleft between his two breasts. He wiped this off with his hand.

Still, things did not seem too peaceful. Amah holding a child, having been busy looking round during the commotion, had carelessly bumped the nose of Rickshaw Man beside her with her Suzhou-style hair combed like the tail of a magpie. Rickshaw Man, trying to shove her away, shoved the child, which turned to face out and clamoured to go home. Amah lurched but then regained her balance, and turned the child round to face White Jerkin. Pointing at him she said:

"Hey, hey, look! Isn't that a fine sight!..."

Suddenly a stiff straw hat on the head of what seemed a student poked through a space. He was conveying to his mouth what seemed to be a sunflower seed. His lower jaw rose to crack it open, then he withdrew. His place was taken by the oval face of a sweaty head caked with dust.

Longfellow with the umbrella was angry too now. He lowered one shoulder to frown at Dead Perch behind it. Prob-

ably because the hot air exhaled from that huge mouth was hard to ward off, especially now that this was the height of summer. Baldy was looking up as if fascinated at the four big white characters on the red board nailed to the telegraph pole. Fat Fellow and the policeman, out of the corners of their eyes, were studying the upturned tips of Amah's slippers.

"Bravo!"

This sudden approving shout from several people somewhere made them realize that something must be up. All heads swivelled round several times. Even the policeman and the prisoner he had in tow also wavered.

"Freshly steamed dumplings! Hey, piping hot. . . ."

Across the road Fat Boy, his head on one side, spun out his cry sleepily. On the road, rickshaw men were silently speeding forward, as if in a hurry to escape from the fierce sun overhead. There was a general sense of disappointment. Fortunately, their eyes searching the surroundings finally spotted a rickshaw, which had stopped on the road a dozen buildings away. The rickshaw man was just scrambling up from the ground.

At once the circular formation scattered. Higgledy-piggledy all made their way over. Halfway there Fat Fellow stopped to rest under a locust tree beside the road. Longfellow was nearly there, being faster than Baldy and Oval Face. The passenger was still seated in the rickshaw while the rickshaw man had now risen to his feet, but was still rubbing his knees. Five or six people had gathered round, grinning, to watch.

"All right?" asked the passenger, as the rickshaw man picked up the shafts.

The latter nodded and pulled the rickshaw off, followed by everyone's disconcerted eyes. They learned that this rickshaw had first upset, then become entangled with another, no one knew exactly how.

Now all was quiet on the road. A few dogs were panting, their tongues lolling out. Fat Fellow under the locust tree watched their rapidly heaving stomachs.

Amah carried over the child, flitting under the shade of the eaves. Fat Boy, his head on one side, narrowed his eyes and spun out his sleepy cry:

"Hot dumplings! Hey! . . . Freshly steamed. . . ."

March 18, 1925

MASTER GAO

He spent the whole morning till after noon today looking at himself in the mirror, reading *A Textbook of Chinese History* and looking up *Yuan Liaofan's Outline*.* How true it is that "literacy is the start of men's grief."** He was suddenly struck by the injustice of life. And this sense of injustice was one he had never experienced before.

First he reflected how very little thought his father and mother had given to their children. As a small boy, what he liked best was climbing mulberry trees to steal mulberries to eat; but they paid no attention at all. Once, when he fell off a tree and cracked open his head, they hadn't given him the right medical treatment, so that to this day above his left eyebrow remained an indelible wedge-shaped scar. Though he now wore his hair extra long, parted in the middle and combed down in front to more or less cover the scar, its tip was still visible, and that was a blemish. If schoolgirls saw it, most likely they would despise him. He laid down the mirror and huffed with exasperation.

In the second place, whoever compiled *A Textbook of Chinese History* had shown too little consideration for teachers. Although this book corresponded to some extent with the *Outline*, whole passages were different, and this partial conformity made it impossible to know how to piece them together in a lecture. But when his eyes fell on the slip of paper inserted in the textbook, he transferred his resentment to the history teacher who had resigned in the middle of the term; because on it was written:

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* An outline of history by a sixteenth-century historian.

** A line from a poem by Su Shi of the Song Dynasty.

Start from Chapter 8, "The Rise and Fall of Eastern Jin."

If the fellow hadn't finished with the Three Kingdoms, it certainly wouldn't have been so difficult for him to prepare. The Three Kingdoms period was the one he knew best. For instance, the stories of how the three heroes became sworn brothers in the Peach Orchard, how Zhuge Liang borrowed an arrow, Zhou Yu was enraged three times, Huang Zhong killed Xia Houyuan at Mt. Dingjun,* and so on — he knew them all by heart. He might have held forth on these for a term or more. And when it came to the Tang Dynasty, such tales as that about Qin Qiong selling a horse** he also knew fairly well. How could he have foreseen that he would be landed with Eastern Jin of all periods? He gave another huff of exasperation, and once more pulled over the *Outline*.

"Hey, haven't you done enough reading outside, without burrowing in here to read?"

A hand had reached round from behind him to grab his chin. He did not move, however, knowing from the voice and action that it was his old friend Huang San, with whom he played mahjong, who had tiptoed in. But though Huang was his old friend, with whom a week before he had played mahjong, watched operas, drunk and chased after girls, ever since the *Dazhong Daily* had published his much acclaimed article "On the Duty of All Chinese to Revise the National History," after which he had received a contract from Xianliang Girls' School, he had considered Huang San a nonentity and rather contemptible. So without turning his head, he pulled a long face and answered seriously:

"Don't talk nonsense! I'm preparing a lesson. . . ."

"Didn't you tell Old Bo you wanted to find a teaching post so as to see girl students?"

"You can't believe that farting dog Old Bo!"

Huang San sat down by his desk, glanced at it and promptly spotted, between the mirror and the clutter of books, a scarlet

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* Episodes from the popular novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms.*

** A story from *Tales of the Tang.*

invitation card which was open. He grabbed it and stared as he read it word by word:

> Respectful Invitation
>
> Master Gao Erchu* is hereby invited to teach history in our school for four hours a week, for an honorarium of thirty cents an hour. This serves as a contract.
>
> Deferentially signed by the school principal He Wan Shuzhen** on the first of the ninth lunar month, the thirteenth year of the Chinese Republic.

"Erchu Master Gao? Who's he? You? Have you changed your name?" Huang San made haste to ask after reading this.

However, Master Gao simply smiled disdainfully. He had indeed changed his name. But Huang San, good for nothing but mahjong, had not yet paid any attention to the new learning and new art. Since he was ignorant of the existence of the great Russian writer Gorki, how could he grasp the far-reaching significance of this change of name? So he simply smiled disdainfully without answering.

"Hey, Old Gao, don't fool around in this futile way!" Huang San put down the contract. "We have a boys' school here, and the goings-on there are already bad enough. Now they've started this girls' school too — goodness knows what trouble will come of that. Why should you mess about with them? It's beneath you. . . ."

"Not necessarily. Especially as Mrs. He insists on inviting me. I can't get out of it. . . ." Annoyed by Huang San's slander of schools, and by seeing from his watch that it was already 2:30, with just half an hour to go to his class, he let his irritation show.

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* Gorki's pen-name, *Gaoerji* in Chinese, is a surname. But Gao takes *Erji* to be his personal name, so gives himself the name Erchu.

** "He" is her husband's surname.

"All right! Forget it." Huang San tactfully changed the subject. "Let's get down to business. We're having a game this evening. Mao Zifu's eldest son from Mao Family Village is here. He's come to invite a geomancer to look them out a good grave site, and he's brought two hundred silver dollars. We've arranged to make up a foursome this evening, with myself, Old Bo and you. Mind you come, and don't keep us waiting. The three of us can clean him out!"

Master Gao thought this over but said nothing.

"Mind you come for sure! I still have to go to fix it up with Old Bo. We'll play in my place. That young fool's a real country bumpkin, so we can be sure of cleaning him out! Give me that set of yours with the clearly marked tiles."

Master Gao stood up slowly, fetched the mahjong box from his bedside and handed it over, then glanced at his watch — 2:40. He thought: Huang San may be smart, but he knows perfectly well that I'm a teacher now, yet runs down schools to my face and stops me from preparing my lesson — he ought to know better. So he said coldly:

"We'll talk it over this evening. I'm off to class now."

So saying, with a baleful glance at the *Outline*, he picked up his textbook, put it in his new briefcase, and very carefully put on his new hat, then left the house with Huang San. Once outside he quickened his step, striding straight ahead sawing the air with his arms. Before long, Huang San lost sight of him completely.

Master Gao, having hurried to Xianliang Girls' School, presented his newly printed card to the humpbacked old gatekeeper. Invited in presently, he followed the humpback round two corners to the staff-room, which also served as a reception room. In the absence of the head-mistress, he was welcomed by the grey-bearded dean, the celebrated Wan Yaopu, also known as the "Ministrant of the Jade Emperor's Altar." Recently the *Dazhong Daily* had serialized his poems "Interchanged with an Immortal."

"Aha! Brother Chu! This is a long-looked for honour!" Wan Yaopu raised clasped hands in repeated salutes, and bent

his knees and leg joints five or six times, as if about to squat down.

"Aha! Brother Yao! This is a long-looked for honour!" Briefcase tucked under one arm, Master Gao went through the same motions as he spoke.

Then they sat down. An orderly, more dead than alive, brought in two cups of boiled water. Master Gao saw that the clock on the opposite wall registered just 2:40 — it was half an hour slower than his watch.

"Ah! That fine article of yours, sir. Yes, indeed . . . your theory of our 'duty to our national quintessence,' one could never tire of discussing it, could read it a hundred times without wearying! It is truly a golden rule for the young, a golden rule! I am devoted to literature too, although a mere dilettante. I cannot compare with you, sir!" He raised clasped hands again, then went on softly, "In our Abounding Virtue Planchette Club, we invoke immortals every day, and I often go to join in. I hope you, sir, will honour us with a visit. Our oracle is the immortal Ruizhu. Judging by her manner of speaking, she is a flower spirit who once descended to this dusty world. She loves to exchange views with men of repute, and is all in favour of the new party. She would certainly look with great favour on a scholar like yourself, sir. Hohohoho!"

But Master Gao was unable to respond with any exalted disquisition, because he had made an inadequate preparation for his class on the rise and fall of Eastern Jin, and by now he had even forgotten part of that. He was on tenterhooks. In this state of mental confusion, some disjointed ideas crossed his mind: in class he should adopt an imposing attitude; should conceal the scar on his temple; should read the textbook slowly, should look at the students in a dignified way. At the same time, indistinctly, he heard Yaopu saying:

". . . bestowed a water-chestnut. . . . 'Tipsily riding a green phoenix above the azure clouds.' Isn't that superb . . . Deng Xiao begged five times before he was granted a poem of four lines with five characters to each. . . . 'Red sleeves sweep the Milky Way. Do not say. . . .' The immortal Ruizhu said. . . .

Your first time, sir. . . . This is our school's botanical garden!"

"Oh!" Erchu suddenly saw the other's raised hand pointing, and collected his wandering thoughts. In the direction pointed out, he saw outside the window a small patch of ground with four or five trees and, opposite, a small three-roomed bungalow.

"Those are the classrooms," said Yaopu, still pointing in the same direction.

"Oh."

"Our pupils are very well-behaved. When not attending classes they work hard at their sewing. . . ."

"Oh." Erchu really felt rather desperate, and hoped Yaopu would stop talking, so that he could hurry up and concentrate on the rise and fall of Eastern Jin.

"Unfortunately, a few of them want to learn to write poetry. That would never do. Reforms are all very well, but it's not appropriate for girls to write poetry. The immortal Ruizhu is not quite in favour of schools for girls, and considers that blurring distinctions between the sexes would not please the rulers of Heaven. I have had a good many discussions with her on the subject. . . ."

Erchu leapt to his feet at the sound of a bell.

"No, no. Sit down! That's the bell for the end of class."

"You are very busy, Brother Yao. Don't stand on ceremony. . . ."

"No, no, I'm not busy. I believe that promoting schools for girls conforms to the world trend; but, unless carefully handled, it may easily go off the track, which would not please the rulers of Heaven; so we should nip any trouble in the bud. If those in charge don't go to extremes but keep to the Middle Way, abiding by our national quintessence, then nothing can go wrong. Do you agree, Brother Chu? This is what the immortal Ruizhu means by 'Something can be said for it.' Hohohoho!"

The orderly brought in two more cups of boiled water; but the bell rang again.

Yaopu invited Erchu to sip some water, then slowly rose to

his feet and conducted him through the botanical garden towards the classrooms.

His heart thumping, he stood stiffly by the platform. Half the room seemed to be nothing but tousled hair. Yaopu took from his lapel pocket a sheet of stationery, which he unfolded. Looking at it, he told the schoolgirls:

"This is Professor Gao, Gao Erchu, a well-known scholar. Everyone knows his famous work 'On the Duty of All Chinese to Reform the Nation's History.' The *Dazhong Daily* has written that Mr. Gao changed his name to Erchu as a mark of his respect for the brilliant Russian man of letters Gorki. His emergence is a happy event for our Chinese world of letters! Now, at the repeated invitation of Principal He, he has kindly consented to come here to teach history. . . ."

Professor Gao had a sudden sensation of isolation. Yaopu had disappeared, leaving him standing all alone by the platform. He had to step onto it, make a bow, and collect his thoughts. Recalling his decision to adopt an imposing attitude, he slowly opened his book and started his lecture on the rise and fall of Eastern Jin.

"Heehee!" He seemed to hear a stifled giggle.

At once Master Gao's face flushed. He looked hastily at the book, he had made no mistake. On it was certainly printed "The Partial Peace of Eastern Jin."

Confronting the book's spine was still half a roomful of tousled hair, with no movement evident. He suspected that he had been imagining things, and that in fact no one had laughed. So collecting his thoughts once more, his eyes on the book, he slowly continued his lecture. At first he had taken in what he was saying, but gradually he grew so confused he had no idea what it was. By the time he came to "The Great Scheme of the Shile,"* all he could hear was giggling.

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*In the third century the Jie people raised troops to subdue Early Zhao and founded Later Zhao. They wiped out the last forces of Western Jin in the north, and opposed Eastern Jin. Shile (274-333), of Jie nationality, was the founder of Later Zhao.

Unable to resist looking at the class, he saw that it was much the same as before: half a roomful of eyes, and many dainty little isosceles triangles with two nostrils in the middle of each. These merged to appear a deep, moving sea, and this surging ocean dazzled his eyes. But when he blinked, it turned in a flash into half a roomful of tousled hair.

He hastily lowered his eyes and kept them on his textbook. Then, unable to help it, he raised them to the ceiling, its white plaster turning yellow, with in the centre a projecting circle. But this circle shifted too, now expanding, now contracting, until his eyes grew dim. Foreseeing that if he looked down, he was bound once again to see that fearful ocean of nostrils and eyes, he had to look back at his book. He had now reached the Battle of Feishui.* Fu Jian was about to panic, "taking plants and trees for troops."

He kept suspecting the girls of laughing up their sleeves, but he stuck it out. He was sure he had been speaking for a long time, yet still the bell did not go. He couldn't consult his watch, for fear they would despise him; but after a while he came to "The Sudden Rise of the Tobas."** After that came the "Chart of the Rise and Fall of the Six Kingdoms," which he had not expected to reach today and had not prepared.

He became aware that the lecture had stopped abruptly halfway.

"As today is the first day, that will do. . . ." he faltered after a panic-stricken pause. Nodding, he stepped down from the platform and walked out of the classroom door.

"Heehee hee!"

Behind him, he seemed to hear a number of girls laughing, to see their laughter emerging from that deep ocean of nos-

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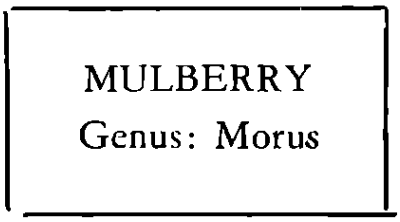
* In 383, at Feishui in Anhui, the Eastern Jin troops defeated a much larger force, whose commander, Fu Jian, mistook all the trees on the hills for enemy soldiers.

** A branch of the Xianbei people, who in 386 set up the Kingdom of Wei and later extended their rule north of the Yellow River with their capital in Pingcheng, present-day Datong.

trils. In a daze, he stepped into the botanical garden, and strode towards the staff-room opposite.

He gave a start, even dropping *A Textbook of Chinese History*, because something had suddenly knocked him on the head. He fell back a couple of paces. When he looked, a horizontal branch stretched in front of his face, its leaves quivering from the collision with his head. He hastily stooped to retrieve his book. By it stood a board bearing the sign:



Behind his back he seemed to hear a number of girls laughing, to see their laughter emerging from that deep ocean of nostrils. So, ashamed to rub the sore place on his head, he hurried straight into the staff-room.

The two cups of boiled water were still there, but there was no sign of the orderly more dead than alive, nor of Wan Yaopu. All was dark and dreary, with nothing but his new briefcase and new hat gleaming in the gloom. The clock on the wall registered only 3:40.

Long after Master Gao had returned to his own room, from time to time a burning sensation shot through him from head to foot. He was absolutely furious. He had reached the conclusion that schools would certainly corrupt social customs, and it would be better to close them, especially schools for girls. Love of vainglory — what was the point of it?

"Heehee!"

He could still hear that smothered laughter. This made him even more furious, strengthening his determination to resign. That evening he would write to Principal He, on the pretext that he had foot trouble. But suppose she insisted, what then? — He still wouldn't go. Goodness only knew what trouble would come of schools for girls. Why should he join forces with them? It was beneath his dignity. He thought it over.

So he resolutely set aside the *Outline*, pushed away the mirror and folded up the contract. About to sit down, it struck him that the contract was abominably red, so he snatched it up and stuffed it into a drawer together with *A Textbook of Chinese History*.

When all these dispositions had been made, the desk with nothing left on it but a mirror looked much neater. Still he felt ill at ease, as if short of half his soul; but at once he woke up, put on his autumn hat with the red knot, and set off for Huang San's home.

"Here you are, Master Erchu Gao!" roared Old Bo.

"You dog!" Glaring, he punched the top of Old Bo's head.

"Give your lesson? Well? Were there many pretty ones?" asked Huang San eagerly.

"I've decided to quit. Goodness knows what trouble will come of schools for girls. A respectable man like me certainly can't afford to get mixed up with them. . . ."

In came the Mao family's eldest son, fat as a dumpling.

"Ah! This is a long-looked-for honour!" All the hands in the room were clasped and raised in greeting, while knees and leg joints buckled two or three times as if about to squat down.

"This is Mr. Gao Ganting, of whom I've spoken to you," Old Bo told the Mao family's eldest son, pointing to Master Gao.

"Ah! This is a long-looked-for honour!" The Mao family's eldest son gave Master Gao a special salute and nod.

On the left side of the room, a square table had been set aslant. While greeting his visitors, Huang San and a little serving-girl set ready chairs and chips. Before long, each corner of the table was lit with a thin candle. The four players took their seats.

All was still except for the clunk of ivory tiles on the red sandalwood table, clearly audible in the silence of early night.

Master Gao's luck was not bad, but his sense of injustice still rankled. Normally he could easily banish all cares from his mind but now, for the first time, he was somewhat worried about the state of the world. Although the chips in front of

him piled up slowly, this failed to set him at ease or make him optimistic. But customs change with the times, and finally he felt the state of the world was not so bad after all. By then, however, it was very late, they had already finished the second round, and he was on the point of completing a flush.

May 1, 1925

THE MISANTHROPE

I

My friendship with Wei Lianshu, now that I come to think of it, was certainly a strange one. It began and ended with a funeral.

When I lived in S—, I often heard him mentioned as an odd fellow: after studying zoology, he had become a history teacher in a middle school; he treated others in cavalier fashion, yet liked to concern himself with their affairs; and while maintaining that the family system should be abolished, he would remit his salary to his grandmother the same day that he drew it. He had many other strange ways, enough to set tongues wagging in the town. One autumn I stayed at Hanshishan with some relatives also named Wei, who were distantly related to him. However, they understood him even less, looking on him as if he were a foreigner. "He's not like us!" they said.

This was not strange, for although China had had modern schools for some twenty years, there was not even a primary school in Hanshishan. He was the only one to have left that mountain village to study; hence in the villagers' eyes he was an undoubted freak. They also envied him, though, saying he had made a lot of money.

Towards the end of autumn, there was an epidemic of dysentery in the village, and in alarm I thought of returning to the town. I heard his grandmother had contracted the disease too, and because of her age her case was serious. Moreover there was not a single doctor in the village. Wei had no other relative but this grandmother, who led a simple life with a maidservant. As he had lost both parents in his childhood,

she had brought him up. She was said to have known much hardship earlier, but was now leading a comfortable life. Since he had neither wife nor children, however, his family was very quiet, and this presumably was one of the things considered freakish about him.

The village was a hundred li from the town by land, and seventy li by water; so that it would take four days to fetch Wei back. In this out-of-the-way village such matters were considered momentous news, eagerly canvassed by all. The next day the old woman was reported to be in a critical state, and the messenger on his way. However, before dawn she died, her last words being:

"Why won't you let me see my grandson?"

Elders of the clan, close relatives, members of his grandmother's family and others crowded the room anticipating Wei's return, which would be in time for the funeral. The coffin and shroud had long been ready, but the immediate problem was how to cope with this grandson, for they expected he would insist on changes in the funeral rites. After a conference, they decided on three terms which he must accept. First, he must wear deep mourning; secondly, he must kowtow to the coffin; and, thirdly, he must let Buddhist monks and Taoist priests say mass. In short, all must be done in the traditional manner.

This decision once reached, they decided to gather there in full force when Wei arrived home, to assist each other in this negotiation which could admit of no compromise. Licking their lips, the villagers eagerly awaited developments. Wei, as a "modern," "a follower of foreign creeds," had always proved unreasonable. A struggle would certainly ensue, which might even result in some novel spectacle.

He arrived home, I heard, in the afternoon, and only bowed to his grandmother's shrine as he entered. The elders proceeded at once according to plan. They summoned him to the hall, and after a lengthy preamble led up to the subject. Then, speaking in unison and at length, they gave him no chance to argue. At last, however, they dried up, and a deep silence

fell in the hall. All eyes fastened fearfully on his lips. But without changing countenance, he answered simply:

"All right."

This was totally unexpected. A weight had been lifted from their minds, yet their hearts felt heavier than ever, for this was so "freakish" as to give rise to anxiety. The villagers looking for news were also disappointed and said to each other, "Strange. He said, 'All right.' Let's go and watch." Wei's "all right" meant that all would be in accordance with tradition, in which case it was not worth watching; still, they wanted to look on, and after dusk the hall filled with light-hearted spectators.

I was one of those who went, having first sent along my gift of incense and candles. As I arrived he was already putting the shroud on the dead. He was a thin man with an angular face, hidden to a certain extent by his dishevelled hair, dark eyebrows and moustache. His eyes gleamed darkly. He laid out the body very well, as deftly as an expert, so that the spectators were impressed. According to the local custom, at a married woman's funeral members of the dead woman's family found fault even if all was well done; however he remained silent, complying with their wishes with a face devoid of all expression. A grey-haired old woman standing before me gave a sigh of envy and respect.

Then people kowtowed; then they wailed, all the women chanting as they wailed. When the body was put in the coffin, all kowtowed again, then wailed again, until the lid of the coffin was nailed down. Silence reigned for a moment, and then there was a stir of surprise and dissatisfaction. I too suddenly realized that Wei had not shed a single tear from beginning to end. He was simply sitting on the mourner's mat, his two eyes gleaming darkly.

In this atmosphere of surprise and dissatisfaction, the ceremony ended. The disgruntled mourners seemed about to leave, but Wei was still sitting on the mat, lost in thought. Suddenly, tears fell from his eyes, then he burst into a long wail like a wounded wolf howling in the wilderness at the

dead of night, anger and sorrow mingled with his agony. This was not in accordance with tradition and, taken by surprise, we were at a loss. After a little hesitation, some went to try to persuade him to stop, and these were joined by more and more people until finally there was a crowd round him. But he sat there wailing, motionless as an iron statue.

With a sense of anti-climax, the crowd dispersed. Wei continued to cry for about half an hour, then suddenly stopped, and without a word to the mourners went straight inside. Later it was reported by spies that he had gone into his grandmother's room, lain down on the bed and, to all appearances, fallen sound asleep.

Two days later, on the eve of my return to town, I heard the villagers discussing eagerly, as if they were possessed, how Wei intended to burn most of his dead grandmother's furniture and possessions, giving the rest to the maidservant who had served her during her life and attended her on her deathbed. Even the house was to be lent to the maid for an indefinite period. Wei's relatives argued themselves hoarse, but he was adamant.

Largely out of curiosity, perhaps, on my way back I passed his house and went in to express condolence. He received me wearing a hemless white mourning dress, and his expression was as cold as ever. I urged him not to take it so to heart, but apart from grunting non-committally all he said was:

"Thanks for your concern."

II

Early that winter we met for the third time. It was in a bookshop in S—, where we nodded simultaneously, showing at least that we were acquainted. But it was at the end of that year, after I lost my job, that we became friends. Thenceforward I paid Wei many visits. In the first place, of course, I had nothing to do; in the second place he was said to sympathize with lame dogs, despite his habitual reserve.

However, fortune being fickle, lame dogs do not remain lame for ever, hence he had few steady friends. Report proved true, for as soon as I sent in my card, he received me. His sitting-room consisted of two rooms thrown into one, quite bare of ornament, with nothing in it apart from table and chairs but some bookcases. Although he was reputed to be terribly "modern," there were few modern books on the shelves. He knew that I had lost my job; but after the usual polite remarks had been exchanged, host and guest sat silent, with nothing to say to each other. I noticed he very quickly finished his cigarette, only dropping it to the ground when it nearly burnt his fingers.

"Have a cigarette," he said suddenly, reaching for another.

So I took one and, between puffs, spoke of teaching and books, still finding very little to say. I was just thinking of leaving when shouts and footsteps were heard outside the door, and four children rushed in. The eldest was about eight or nine, the smallest four or five. The hands, faces and clothes were very dirty, and they were thoroughly unprepossessing; yet Wei's face lit up with pleasure, and getting up at once he walked to the other room, saying:

"Come, Daliang, Erliang, all of you! I have bought the mouth-organs you wanted yesterday."

The children rushed in after him, to return immediately with a mouth-organ apiece; but once outside they started fighting, and one of them cried.

"There's one each; they're exactly the same. Don't squabble!" he said as he followed them.

"Whose children are they?" I asked.

"The landlord's. They have no mother, only a grandmother."

"Your landlord is a widower?"

"Yes. His wife died three or four years ago, and he has not remarried. Otherwise, he would not rent his spare rooms to a bachelor like me." He said this with a cold smile.

I wanted very much to ask why he had remained single so long, but I did not know him well enough.

Once you knew him well, he was a good talker. He was full of ideas, many of them quite remarkable. What exasperated me were some of his guests. As a result, probably, of reading Yu Dafu's* romantic stories, they constantly referred to themselves as "the young unfortunate" or "the outcast"; and, sprawling on the big chairs like lazy and arrogant crabs, they would sigh, smoke and frown all at the same time.

Then there were the landlord's children, who were always fighting among themselves, knocking over bowls and plates, begging for cakes, keeping up an ear-splitting din. Yet the sight of them invariably dispelled Wei's customary coldness, and they seemed to be the most precious thing in his life. Once the third child was said to have measles. He was so worried that his dark face took on an even darker hue. The attack proved a light one, however, and thereafter the children's grandmother made a joke of his anxiety.

"Children are always good. They are all so innocent . . ." he seized an opening to say one day, having, apparently, sensed my impatience.

"Not always," I answered casually.

"Always. Children have none of the faults of grown-ups. If they turn out badly later, as you contend, it is because they have been moulded by their environment. Originally they are not bad, but innocent. . . . I think China's only hope lies in this."

"I don't agree. Without the root of evil, how could they bear evil fruit in later life? Take a seed, for example. It is because it contains the embryo leaves, flowers and fruits, that it can grow later into these things. There must be a cause. . . ." Since my unemployment, just like those great officials who resigned from office and took up Buddhism, I had been reading the Buddhist sutras. I did not understand Buddhist philosophy though, and was just talking at random.

However, Wei was annoyed. He gave me a look, then said no more. I could not tell whether he had no more to say, or whether he felt it not worth arguing with me. But he looked

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* A contemporary of Lu Xun's, who wrote about repressed young men.

cold again, as he had not done for a long time, and smoked two cigarettes one after the other in silence. By the time he reached for the third cigarette, I had to beat a retreat.

Our estrangement lasted three months. Then, owing in part to forgetfulness, in part to the fact that he fell out with those "innocent" children, he came to consider my slighting remarks about children as excusable. Or so I surmised. This happened in my house after drinking one day, when, with a rather melancholy look, he cocked his head, and said:

"Come to think of it, it's really curious. On my way here I met a small child with a reed in his hand, which he pointed at me, shouting, 'Kill!' He was just a toddler. . . ."

"He must have been moulded by his environment."

As soon as I had said this, I wanted to take it back. However, he did not seem to care, just went on drinking heavily, smoking furiously in between.

"I meant to ask you," I said, trying to change the subject. "You don't usually call on people, what made you come out today? I've known you for more than a year, yet this is the first time you've been here."

"I was just going to tell you: don't call on me for the time being. There are a father and son in my place who are perfect pests. They are scarcely human!"

"Father and son? Who are they?" I was surprised.

"My cousin and his son. Well, the son resembles the father."

"I suppose they came to town to see you and have a good time?"

"No. They came to talk me into adopting the boy."

"What, to adopt the boy?" I exclaimed in amazement. "But you are not married."

"They know I won't marry. But that's nothing to them. Actually they want to inherit that tumble-down house of mine in the village. I have no other property, you know; as soon as I get money I spend it. I've only that house. Their purpose in life is to drive out the old maidservant who is living in the place for the time being."

The cynicism of his remark took me aback. However I tried to soothe him, by saying:

"I don't think your relatives can be so bad. They are only rather old-fashioned. For instance, that year when you cried bitterly, they came forward eagerly to plead with you. . . ."

"When I was a child and my father died, I cried bitterly because they wanted to take the house from me and make me put my mark on the document, and they came forward eagerly *then* to plead with me. . . ." He looked up, as if searching the air for that bygone scene.

"The crux of the matter is — you have no children. Why don't you get married?" I had found a way to change the subject, and this was something I had been wanting to ask for a long time. It seemed an excellent opportunity.

He looked at me in surprise, then dropped his gaze to his knees, and started smoking. I received no answer to my question.

III

Yet, even this inane existence he was not allowed to enjoy in peace. Gradually there appeared anonymous attacks in the less reputable papers, and in the schools rumours spread concerning him. This was not the simple gossip of the old days, but deliberately damaging. I knew this was the outcome of articles he had taken to writing for the magazines, so I paid no attention. The citizens of S— disliked nothing more than fearless argument, and anyone guilty of it would indubitably become the object of secret attacks. This was the rule, and Wei knew it too. However, in spring, when I heard he had been asked to resign by the school authorities, I confessed it surprised me. Of course, this was only to be expected, and it surprised me simply because I had hoped my friend could escape. The citizens of S— were not proving more vicious than usual.

I was occupied then with my own problems, negotiating to go to a school in Shanyang that autumn, so I had no time to call on him. Some three months passed before I was at leisure, and even then it had not occurred to me to visit him. One day, passing the main street, I happened to pause before a second-hand bookstall, where I was startled to see displayed an early edition of the *Commentaries on the "Records of the Historian,"** from Wei's collection. He was no connoisseur, but he loved books, and I knew he prized this particular book. He must be very hard pressed to have sold it. It seemed scarcely possible he could have become so poor only two or three months after losing his job; yet he spent money as soon as he had it, and had never saved. So I decided to call on him. On the same street I bought a bottle of liquor, two packages of peanuts and two smoked fish-heads.

His door was closed. I called out twice, but there was no reply. Thinking he was asleep, I called louder, hammering on the door at the same time.

"He's probably out." The children's grandmother, a fat woman with small eyes, thrust her grey head out from the opposite window, and spoke impatiently.

"Where has he gone?" I asked.

"Where? Who knows — where could he go? You can wait, he will be back soon."

So I pushed open the door and went into his sitting-room. It was greatly changed, looking desolate in its emptiness. There was little furniture left, while all that remained of his library were those foreign books which could not be sold. The middle of the room was still occupied by the table round which those woeful and gallant young men, unrecognized geniuses, and dirty, noisy children had formerly gathered. Now it all seemed very quiet, and there was a thin layer of dust on the table. I put the bottle and packages down, pulled over a chair, and sat down by the table facing the door.

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* By Sima Zhen of the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

Very soon, sure enough, the door opened, and someone stepped in as silently as a shadow. It was Wei. It might have been the twilight that made his face look dark; but his expression was unchanged.

"Ah, it's you? How long have you been here?" He seemed pleased.

"Not very long," I said. "Where have you been?"

"Nowhere in particular. Just taking a stroll."

He pulled up a chair too and sat by the table. We started drinking, and spoke of his losing his job. However, he did not care to talk much about it, considering it as only to be expected. He had come across many similar cases. It was not strange at all, and not worth discussing. As usual, he drank heavily, and discoursed on society and the study of history. Something made me glance at the empty bookshelves and, remembering the *Commentaries on the "Records of the Historian,"* I was conscious of a slight loneliness and sadness.

"Your sitting-room has a deserted look. . . . Have you had fewer visitors recently?"

"None at all. They don't find it much fun when I'm not in a good mood. A bad mood certainly makes people uncomfortable. Just as no one goes to the park in winter. . . ."

He took two sips of liquor in succession, then fell silent. Suddenly, looking up, he asked, "I suppose you have had no luck either in finding work?"

Although I knew he was only venting his feelings as a result of drinking, I felt indignant at the way people treated him. Just as I was about to say something, he pricked up his ears, then, scooping up some peanuts, went out. Outside, the laughter and shouts of the children could be heard.

But as soon as he went out, the children became quiet. It sounded as if they had left. He went after them, and said something, but I could hear no reply. Then he came back, as silent as a shadow, and put the handful of peanuts back in the package.

"They don't even want to eat anything I give them," he said sarcastically, in a low voice.

"Old Wei," I said, forcing a smile, although I was sick at heart, "I think you are tormenting yourself unnecessarily. Why think so poorly of your fellow men?"

He only smiled cynically.

"I haven't finished yet. I suppose you consider that people like me, who come here occasionally, do so in order to kill time or amuse themselves at your expense?"

"No, I don't. Well, sometimes I do. Perhaps they come to find something to talk about."

"Then you are wrong. People are not like that. You are really wrapping yourself up in a cocoon. You should take a more cheerful view." I sighed.

"Maybe. But tell me, where does the thread for the cocoon come from? Of course, there are plenty of people like that; take my grandmother, for example. Although I have none of her blood in my veins, I may inherit her fate. But that doesn't matter, I have already bewailed my fate together with hers. . . ."

Then I remembered what had happened at his grandmother's funeral. I could almost see it before my eyes.

"I still don't understand why you cried so bitterly," I said bluntly.

"You mean at my grandmother's funeral? No, you wouldn't." He lit the lamp. "I suppose it was because of that that we became friends," he said quietly. "You know, this grandmother was my grandfather's second wife. My father's own mother died when he was three." Growing thoughtful, he drank silently, and finished a smoked fish-head.

"I didn't know it to begin with. Only, from my childhood I was puzzled. At that time my father was still alive, and our family was well off. During the lunar New Year we would hang up the ancestral images and hold a grand sacrifice. It was one of my rare pleasures to look at those splendidly dressed images. At that time a maidservant would always carry me to an image, and point at it, saying, 'This is your own grandmother. Bow to her so that she will protect you and make you grow up strong and healthy.' I could not understand how I came to have another grandmother, in addition to the one be-

side me. But I liked this grandmother who was 'my own.' She was not as old as the granny at home. Young and beautiful, wearing a red costume with golden embroidery and a headdress decked with pearls, she resembled my mother. When I looked at her, her eyes seemed to gaze down on me, and a faint smile appeared on her lips. I knew she was very fond of me too.

"But I liked the granny at home too, who sat all day under the window slowly plying her needle. However, no matter how merrily I laughed and played in front of her, or called to her, I could not make her laugh; and that made me feel she was cold, unlike other children's grandmothers. Still, I liked her. Later on, though, I gradually cooled towards her, not because I had grown older and learned she was not my own grandmother, but rather because I was exasperated by the way she kept on sewing mechanically, day in day out. She was unchanged, however. She sewed, looked after me, loved and protected me as before; and though she seldom smiled, she never scolded me. It was the same after my father died. Later on, we lived almost entirely on her sewing, so it was still the same, until I went to school. . . ."

The light flickered as the kerosene gave out, and he stood up to refill the lamp from a small tin kettle under the bookcase.

"The price of kerosene has gone up twice this month," he said slowly, after turning up the wick. "Life will become harder every day. She remained the same until I graduated from school and got a job, when our life became more secure. She didn't change, I suppose, until she was sick and couldn't carry on, but had to take to her bed. . . .

"Since her later days, I think, were not too unhappy on the whole, and she lived to a great age, I need not have mourned. Besides, weren't there a lot of others there eager to wail? Even those who had tried their hardest to rob her wailed, or appeared bowed down with grief." He laughed. "However, at that moment her whole life rose to my mind — the life of one who created loneliness for herself and tasted its bitterness. And I felt there were many people like that. I wanted to weep for

them; but perhaps it was largely because I was too sentimental. . . .

"Your present advice to me is what I felt with regard to her. But actually my ideas at that time were wrong. As for myself, since I grew up my feelings for her cooled. . . ."

He paused, with a cigarette between his fingers and bending his head lost himself in thought. The lamplight flickered.

"Well, it is hard to live so that no one will mourn for your death," he said, as if to himself. After a pause he looked up at me, and asked, "I suppose you can't help? I shall have to find something to do very soon."

"Have you no other friends you could ask?" I was in no position to help myself then, let alone others.

"I have a few, but they are all in the same boat. . . ."

When I left him, the full moon was high in the sky and the night was very still.

IV

The teaching profession in Shanyang was no bed of roses. I taught for two months without receiving a cent of salary, until I had to cut down on cigarettes. But the school staff, even those earning only fifteen or sixteen dollars a month, were easily contented. They all had iron constitutions steeled by hardship, and, although lean and haggard, would work from morning till night; while if interrupted at work by their superiors, they would stand up respectfully. Thus they all practised plain living and high thinking. This reminded me, somehow, of Wei's parting words. He was then even more hard up, and often looked embarrassed, having apparently lost his former cynicism. When he heard that I was leaving, he had come late at night to see me off, and, after hesitating for some time, had stuttered:

"Would there be anything for me there? Even copying work, at twenty to thirty dollars a month, would do. I. . . ."

I was surprised. I had not thought he would consider anything so low, and did not know how to answer.

"I . . . I have to live a little longer. . . ."

"I'll look out when I get there. I'll do my best."

This was what I had promised at the time, and the words often rang in my ears later, as if Wei were before me, stuttering, "I have to live a little longer." I tried to interest various people in his case, but to no avail. There were few vacancies, and many unemployed; they always ended by apologizing for being unable to help, and I would write him an apologetic letter. By the end of the term, things had gone from bad to worse. The magazine *Reason*, edited by some of the local gentry, began to attack me. Naturally no names were mentioned, but it cleverly insinuated that I was stirring up trouble in the school, even my recommendation of Wei being interpreted as a manoeuvre to gather a clique about me.

So I had to keep quiet. Apart from attending class, I lay low in my room, sometimes even fearing I might be considered as stirring up trouble when cigarette smoke escaped from my window. For Wei, naturally, I could do nothing. This state of affairs prevailed till midwinter.

It had been snowing all day, and the snow had not stopped by evening. Outside was so still, you could almost hear the sound of stillness. I closed my eyes and sat there in the dim lamplight, doing nothing, imagining the snowflakes falling to augment the boundless drifts of snow. It would be nearly New Year at home too, and everybody would be busy. I saw myself a child again, making a snowman with a group of children on the level ground in the back yard. The eyes of the snowman, made of jet-black fragments of coal, suddenly turned into Wei's eyes.

"I have to live a little longer." The same voice again.

"What for?" I asked inadvertently, aware immediately of the ineptitude of my remark.

It was this reply that woke me up. I sat up, lit a cigarette and opened the window, only to find the snow falling even faster. Then I heard a knock at the door, and a moment later

it opened to admit the servant, whose step I knew. He handed me a big envelope, more than six inches in length. The address was scrawled, but I saw Wei's name on it.

This was the first letter he had written me since I left S—. Knowing he was a bad correspondent, I had not wondered at his silence, only sometimes I had felt he should have given me some news of himself. So the receipt of this letter was quite a surprise. I tore it open. The letter had been hastily scrawled, and said:

. . . Shenfei,

How should I address you? I am leaving a blank for you to fill in as you please. It will be all the same to me.

I have altogether received three letters from you. I did not reply for one simple reason: I had no money even to buy stamps.

Perhaps you would like to know what has happened to me. To put it simply: I have failed. I thought I had failed before, but I was wrong then; now, however, I am really a failure. Formerly there was someone who wanted me to live a little longer, and I wished it too, but found it difficult. Now, there is no need, yet I must go on living. . . .

Shall I then live on?

The one who wanted me to live a little longer could not live himself. He was trapped and killed by the enemy. Who killed him? No one knows.

Changes take place so swiftly! During the last half year I have virtually been a beggar; it's true, I could be considered a beggar. However, I had my purpose: I was willing to beg for the cause, to go cold and hungry for it, to be lonely for it, to suffer hardship for it. But I did not want to destroy myself. So you see, the fact that one person wanted me to live on proved extremely potent. But now there is no one, not one. At the same time I feel I do not deserve to live, nor do some other people either, in my opinion. Yet, I am conscious of wanting to live on to spite those who wish

me dead; for at least there is no one left who wants me to live decently, and so no one can be hurt. I don't want to hurt such people. But now there is no one, not one. What a joy! Wonderful! I am now doing what I formerly detested and opposed. I am now giving up all I formerly believed in and upheld. I have really failed — but I have won.

Do you think I am mad? Do you think I have become a hero or a great man? No, it is not that. It is very simple; I have become adviser to General Du, hence I have eighty dollars salary a month.

. . . Shenfei,

What will you think of me? You decide; it is the same to me.

Perhaps you still remember my former sitting-room, the one in which we had our first and last talks. I am still using it. There are new guests, new bribes, new flattery, new seeking for promotion, new kowtows and bows, new mahjong and drinking games, new haughtiness and disgust, new sleeplessness and vomiting of blood. . . .

You said in your last letter that your teaching was not going well. Would you like to be an adviser? Say the word, and I will arrange it for you. Actually, work in the gatehouse would be the same. There would be the same guests, bribes and flattery. . . .

It is snowing heavily here. How is it where you are? It is now midnight, and having just vomited some blood has sobered me. I recall that you have actually written three times in succession to me since autumn — amazing! So I must give you some news of myself, hoping you will not be shocked.

I probably shall not write again; you know my ways of old. When will you be back? If you come soon, we may meet again. Still, I suppose we have taken different roads, so you had better forget me. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for trying to find work for me. But now please forget me; I am doing "well."

Wei Lianshu
December 14th

Though this letter did not "shock" me, when, after a hasty perusal, I read it carefully again, I felt both uneasy and relieved. At least his livelihood was secure, and I need not worry any more. At any rate, I could do nothing here. I thought of writing to him, but felt there was nothing to say.

In fact, I was gradually forgetting him. His face no longer sprang so often to my mind's eye. However, less than ten days after hearing from him, the office of the *S— Weekly* started sending me its paper. I did not read such papers as a rule, but since it was sent to me I glanced at some of the contents. And this reminded me of Wei, for the paper frequently carried poems and essays about him, such as "Calling on the Scholar Wei at Night During a Snowstorm," "A Poetic Gathering at the Scholarly Abode of Adviser Wei," and so forth. Once, indeed, under the heading "Table Talk," they retailed with gusto certain stories which had previously been considered material for ridicule, but which had now become "Tales of an Eccentric Genius." Only an exceptional man, it was implied, could have done such unusual things.

Although this recalled him to me, my impression of him was growing fainter. Yet all the time he seemed to be gaining a closer hold on me, which often gave me an inexplicable sense of uneasiness and cast a shadow of apprehension. However, by autumn the newspaper stopped coming, while the Shanyang magazine began to publish the first instalment of a long essay called "The Element of Truth in Rumours," which asserted that rumours about certain gentlemen had reached the ears of the mighty. My name was among those attacked. I had then to be very careful. I had to take care that my cigarette smoke did not get in other people's way. All these precautions took so much time I could attend to nothing else, and naturally had no leisure to think of Wei. I had actually forgotten him.

However, I could not hold my job till summer. By the end of May I had left Shanyang.

V

I wandered between Shanyang, Licheng and Taigu for more than half a year, but could find no work, so I decided to go back to S—. I arrived one afternoon in early spring. It was a cloudy day with everything wrapped in mist. Since there were vacant rooms in my old hostel, I stayed there. On the road I had started thinking of Wei, and after my arrival I made up my mind to call on him after dinner. Taking two packages of the well-known Wenxi cakes, I threaded my way through several damp streets, stepping cautiously past many sleeping dogs, until I reached his door. It seemed very bright inside. I thought even his rooms were better lit since he had become an adviser, and smiled to myself. However, when I looked up, I saw a strip of white paper* stuck on the door. It occurred to me, as I stepped inside, that the children's grandmother might be dead; but I went straight in.

In the dimly lit courtyard there was a coffin, by which some soldier or orderly in uniform was standing, talking to the children's grandmother. A few workers in short coats were loitering there too. My heart began to beat faster. Just then she turned to look at me.

"Ah, you're back? Why didn't you come earlier?" she suddenly exclaimed.

"Who . . . who has passed away?" Actually by now I knew, but yet I asked.

"Adviser Wei died the day before yesterday."

I looked around. The sitting-room was dimly lit, probably by one lamp only; the front room, however, was decked with white funeral curtains, and the woman's grandchildren had gathered outside that room.

"His body is there," she said, coming forward and pointing to the front room. "After Mr. Wei was promoted, I let him my front room too; that is where he is now."

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* White is the mourning colour in China. White paper on the door indicated that there had been a death in the house.

There was no writing on the funeral curtain. In front stood a long table, then a square table, spread with some dozen dishes. As I went in, two men in long white gowns suddenly appeared to bar the way, their eyes, like those of a dead fish, fixed in surprise and mistrust on my face. I hastily explained my relation with Wei, and the landlady came up to confirm my statement. Then their hands and eyes dropped, and they allowed me to go forward to bow to the dead.

As I bowed, a wail sounded beside me from the floor. Looking down I saw a child of about ten, kneeling on a mat, also dressed in white. His hair had been cut short, and had some hemp attached to it.

Later I found out that one of these men was Wei's cousin, his nearest in kin, while the other was a distant nephew. I asked to be allowed to see Wei, but they tried their best to dissuade me, saying I was too "polite." Finally they gave in, and lifted the curtain.

This time I saw Wei in death. But, strangely enough, though he was wearing a crumpled shirt, stained in front with blood, and his face was very lean, his expression was unchanged. He was sleeping so placidly, with closed mouth and eyes, that I was tempted to put my finger before his nostrils to see if he were still breathing.

Everything was deathly still, both the living and the dead. As I withdrew, his cousin accosted me to state that Wei's untimely death, just when he was in the prime of life and had a great future before him, was not only a calamity for his humble family but a cause of sorrow for his friends. He seemed to be apologizing for Wei for dying. Such eloquence is rare among villagers. However, after that he fell silent again, and everything was deathly still, both the living and the dead.

Feeling cheerless, but by no means sad, I withdrew to the courtyard to chat with the old woman. She told me the funeral would soon take place; they were waiting for the shroud. And when the coffin was nailed down, people born under certain stars should not be near. She rattled on, her words pouring

out like a flood. She spoke of Wei's illness, incidents during his life, and even voiced certain criticisms.

"You know, after Mr. Wei came into luck, he was a different man. He held his head high and looked very haughty. He stopped treating people in his old pedantic way. Did you know, he used to act like an idiot, and call me madam? Later on," she chuckled, "he called me 'old bitch'; it was too funny for words. When people sent him rare herbs like atractylis, instead of eating them himself, he would throw them into the courtyard, just here, and call out, 'You take this, old bitch!' After he came into luck, he had scores of visitors; so I vacated my front room for him, and moved into a side one. As we have always said jokingly, he became a different man after his good luck. If you had come one month earlier, you could have seen all the fun here: drinking games practically every day, talking, laughing, singing, poetry writing and mahjong games. . . .

"He used to be more afraid of children than they are of their own father, practically grovelling to them. But recently that changed too, and he was a good one for jokes. My grandchildren liked to play with him, and would go to his rooms whenever they could. He would think up all sorts of practical jokes. For instance, when they wanted him to buy things for them, he would make them bark like dogs or make a thumping kowtow. Ah, that was fun. Two months ago, my second grandchild asked him to buy him a pair of shoes, and had to make three thumping kowtows. He's still wearing them; they aren't worn out yet."

When one of the men in white came out, she stopped talking. I asked about Wei's illness, but there was little she could tell me. She knew only that he had been losing weight for a long time, but they had thought nothing of it because he always looked so cheerful. About a month before, they heard he had been coughing blood, but it seemed he had not seen a doctor. Then he had to stay in bed, and three days before he died he seemed to have lost the power of speech. His cousin had come all the way from the village to ask him if he had any savings,

but he said not a word. His cousin thought he was shamming, but some people had said those dying of consumption did lose the power of speech. . . .

"But Mr. Wei was a queer man," she suddenly whispered. "He never saved money, always spent it like water. His cousin still suspects we got something out of him. Heaven knows, we got nothing. He just spent it in his haphazard way. Buying something today, selling it tomorrow, or breaking it up — God knows what happened. When he died there was nothing left, all spent! Otherwise it would not be so dismal today. . . .

"He just fooled about, not wanting to do the proper thing. I had thought of that, and spoken to him. At his age, he should have got married; it would have been easy for him then. And if no suitable family could be found, at least he could have bought a few concubines to go on with. People should keep up appearances. But he would laugh whenever I brought it up. 'Old bitch, you are always worrying about such things for other people,' he would say. He was never serious, you see; he wouldn't listen to good advice. If he had listened to me, he wouldn't be wandering lonely in the nether world now; at least there would be wailing from his dear ones. . . ."

A shop assistant arrived, bringing some clothes with him. The three relatives of the dead picked out the underwear, then disappeared behind the curtain. Soon, the curtain was lifted; the new underwear had been put on the corpse, and they proceeded to put on his outer garments. I was surprised to see them dress him in a pair of khaki military trousers with broad red stripes, and a tunic with glittering epaulettes. I could not say what rank these indicated, or how he acquired it. Then the body was placed in the coffin. Wei lay there awkwardly, a pair of brown leather shoes beside his feet, a paper sword at his waist, and beside his lean and ashen face a military cap with a gilt band.

The three relatives wailed beside the coffin, then stopped and wiped their tears. The boy with hemp attached to his hair withdrew, as did the old woman's third grandchild — no doubt they had been born under the wrong stars.

As the labourers lifted the coffin lid, I stepped forward to see Wei for the last time.

In his awkward costume he lay placidly, with closed mouth and eyes. There seemed to be an ironical smile on his lips, mocking the ridiculous corpse.

When the nails began to be hammered in, the wailing started afresh. I could not stand it very long, so withdrew to the courtyard; then, somehow, I was out of the gate. The damp road glistened, and I looked up at the sky where the cloud banks had scattered and a full moon hung, shedding a cool light.

I walked with quickened steps, as if eager to break through some heavy barrier, but finding it impossible. Something struggled in my ears, and, after a long, long time, burst out. It was like a long howl, the howl of a wounded wolf crying in the wilderness in the depth of night, anger and sorrow mingled in its agony.

Then my heart felt lighter, and I paced calmly on along the damp cobbled road under the moon.

October 17, 1925

REGRET FOR THE PAST

Juansheng's Notes

I want, if I can, to record my remorse and grief, for Zijun's sake as well as for my own.

How silent and empty it is, this shabby room in a forgotten corner of the hostel. Time certainly flies. A whole year has passed since I fell in love with Zijun and, thanks to her, escaped from this silence and emptiness. On my return here, as ill luck would have it, this was the only room vacant. The broken window with the half-withered locust tree and old wistaria outside it and the square table in front of it are unchanged. Unchanged too are the mouldering wall and wooden bed beside it. At night I lie alone, just as I did before living with Zijun. The past year has been blotted out as if it had never been, as if I had never moved out of this shabby room to set up house, in a small way but with high hopes, in Lucky Lane.

Nor is that all. A year ago there was a difference in this silence and emptiness for it held expectancy, the expectancy of Zijun's arrival. The tapping of high heels on the brick pavement, cutting into my long, restless waiting, would galvanize me into life. Then I would see her pale round face dimpling in a smile, her thin white arms, striped cotton blouse and black skirt. And she would bring in to show me a new leaf from the half-withered locust tree outside the window, or clusters of the mauve wistaria flowers that hung from a vine which looked as if made of iron.

But now there is only silence and emptiness. Zijun will never come back — never, never again.

When Zijun was not here, I could see nothing in this shabby room. Out of sheer boredom I would pick up a book — science

or literature, it was all the same to me — and read on and on till it suddenly dawned on me that I had turned a dozen pages without taking in a word. My sense of hearing, however, was so acute that I seemed able to hear all the footsteps outside the gate, including those of Zijun, gradually approaching — but all too often they faded away again to be lost at last in the medley of other footfalls. I hated the steward's son who wore cloth-soled shoes which sounded quite different from those of Zijun. I hated the little wretch next door who used face-cream, often wore new leather shoes, and whose steps sounded all too like those of Zijun.

Could her rickshaw have been upset? Could she have been run over by a tram? . . .

I would want to put on my hat to go and find her, but her uncle had cursed me to my face.

Then, abruptly, I would hear her draw nearer, step by step, so that by the time I went out to meet her she would already have passed the wistaria trellis, her face dimpling in a smile. Probably she wasn't badly treated after all in her uncle's home. I would calm down and, after we had gazed at each other in silence for a moment, the shabby room would gradually be filled with the sound of my pronouncements on the tyranny of the family, the need to break with tradition, the equality of men and women, Ibsen, Tagore and Shelley. . . . She would nod her head, smiling, her eyes filled with a childlike look of wonder. On the wall was pinned a copper-plate reproduction of a bust of Shelley, cut out from a magazine. It was one of the best-looking likenesses of him, but when I pointed it out to her she only gave it a hasty glance, then hung her head as if in embarrassment. In matters like this, Zijun had probably not freed herself completely from the trammels of old ideas. It occurred to me later that it might be better to substitute a picture of Shelley drowning at sea, or a portrait of Ibsen. But I never got round to it. And now even this print has vanished.

"I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me."

She came out with this statement clearly, firmly and gravely after a thoughtful silence, following a conversation about her uncle who was here and her father in the country. We had known each other then for half a year. By that time I had told her all my views, all about myself, and what my failings were. I had hidden very little, and she understood me completely. These few words of hers stirred me to the bottom of my heart and rang in my ears for many days afterwards. I was unspeakably happy to know that Chinese women were not as hopeless as the pessimists made out, and that we should see in the not too distant future the splendour of the dawn.

Each time I saw her out, I kept several paces behind her. And each time the old wretch's face, bewhiskered as if with fish tentacles, would be pressed so hard against the dirty window-pane that the tip of his nose was flattened. And each time we reached the outer courtyard, against the bright glass window there was the little wretch's face, plastered with face-cream. But looking neither right nor left as she walked proudly out, she did not see them. And I walked proudly back.

"I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me." Her mind was completely made up on this point. She was by far the more thoroughgoing and resolute of the two of us. What did she care about the half pot of face-cream or the flattened nose tip?

I cannot remember clearly how I expressed my true, passionate love for her. Not only now: my impression just after the event itself was hazy. Thinking back that night, I recollected only a few disjointed scraps; while a month or two after we started living together, even these vanished like dreams without a trace. All I can remember is that for about a fortnight beforehand I had considered very carefully what attitude to take, how to make my declaration, and how to behave if turned down. But when the time came it was all in vain. In my nervousness, something constrained me to use a method seen in films. The thought of this makes me thoroughly ashamed, yet it is the only thing I remember clearly. Even today it is

like a solitary lamp in a dark room, showing me clasping her hand with tears in my eyes and going down on one knee. . . .

At the time I did not even notice Zijun's reaction clearly. All I knew was that she accepted my proposal. However, I seem to remember that her face first turned pale then gradually flushed red, redder than I ever saw it before or after. Sadness and joy mingled with apprehension flashed from her childlike eyes, although she tried to avoid my gaze, looking ready in her confusion to fly out of the window. Then I knew she accepted my proposal, although not knowing what she said or whether she said anything at all.

She, however, remembered everything. She could reel off the speech I made as if she had learned it by heart. She described my conduct in detail, to the life, like a film unfolding itself before her eyes, including of course that trashy scene from the movies which I was only too anxious to forget. The night, when all was still, was our time for review. I was often interrogated and examined, or ordered to repeat everything said on that occasion; yet she often had to fill in gaps and correct my mistakes as if I were a Grade D student.

Gradually these reviews became few and far between. But whenever I saw her gazing raptly into space, a tender look dawning on her dimpling face, I knew she was going over that old lesson again and feared she was visualizing my ridiculous act from the movies. I knew, though, that she must be visualizing it, that she insisted on visualizing it.

But she didn't find it ridiculous. Though I thought it laughable, even contemptible, to her it was no joke. And I knew this beyond a doubt because of her true, passionate love for me.

Late spring last year was our happiest and also our busiest time. I had calmed down by then, although bestirring my mental faculties in step with my physical activity. This was when we started walking side by side in the street. We went several times to the park, but most of our outings were in search of lodgings. On the road I was conscious of searching

looks, sarcastic smiles or lewd and contemptuous glances which unless I was on my guard set me shivering, so that at every instant I had to summon all my pride and defiance to my support. She, however, was completely fearless and impervious to all this. She continued slowly and calmly on her way, as if there were no one in sight.

It was no easy matter finding lodgings. In most cases we were refused on some pretext or other, while we ourselves turned down a few places as unsuitable. To start with we were very particular — and yet not too particular either, because we saw that most of these lodgings did not look the sort of place where we could live. Later on, all we asked was to be tolerated. We had looked at over twenty places before we found one we could make do: two rooms with a northern exposure in a small house in Lucky Lane. The owner was a petty official but an intelligent man, who occupied only the central and the side rooms. His household consisted simply of a wife, a baby girl not yet one year old, and a maidservant from the country. As long as the child didn't cry, it would be very quiet.

Our furniture, simple as it was, had already taken the greater part of the money I had raised; and Zijun had sold her only gold ring and earrings too. I tried to stop her, but when she insisted I didn't press the point. I knew that unless allowed to make a small investment in our home she would feel uncomfortable.

She had already quarrelled with her uncle, so enraging him in fact that he had disowned her. And I had broken with several friends who thought they were giving me good advice but were actually either afraid for me, or jealous. Still, this meant we were very quiet. Although it was getting on for dusk when I left the office and the rickshaw man always went slowly, at last the time came when we were together again. First we would look at each other in silence, then relax and talk intimately, and finally fall silent again. We both bowed our heads pensively then, without anything particular in mind. Little by little, body and soul alike, she became an open book to me. In the short space of three weeks I learned more about

her, overcoming many impediments which I had fancied I understood but now discovered to have been real barriers.

As the days passed, Zijun became more lively. She had no liking for flowers though, and when I bought two pots of flowers at the market she left them unwatered for four days so that they died neglected in a corner. I hadn't the time to see to everything. She had a liking for animals, however, which she may have picked up from the official's wife; and in less than a month our household was greatly increased as four chicks of ours started picking their way across the courtyard with the landlady's dozen. But the two mistresses could tell them apart, each able to identify her own. Then there was a spotted peke, bought at the market. I believe he had a name of his own to begin with, but Zijun gave him another one — Asui. And I called him Asui too, though I didn't like the name.

It is true that love must be constantly renewed, must grow and create. When I spoke of this to Zijun, she nodded understandingly.

Ah, what peaceful, happy evenings those were!

Tranquillity and happiness will grow stale if unchanged, unrenewed. While in the hostel, we had occasional differences of opinion or misunderstandings; but even these vanished after we moved to Lucky Lane. We just sat facing each other in the lamplight, reminiscing, savouring again the joy of the new harmony which had followed our disputes.

Zijun grew plumper, her cheeks became rosier; the only pity was that she was too busy. Housekeeping left her no time even to chat, much less to read or go for walks. We often said we would have to get a maid.

Another thing that upset me on my return in the evening was her covert look of unhappiness, or the forced smile which depressed me even more. Luckily I discovered that this was owing to her secret feud with the petty official's wife, the bone of contention being the two families' chicks. But why wouldn't she tell me outright? People ought to have a home of their own. A lodging of this kind was no place to live in.

I had my routine too. Six days of the week I went from home to the bureau and from the bureau home. In the office I sat at my desk copying, copying endless official documents and letters. At home I kept her company or helped her light the stove, boil rice or steam rolls. This was when I learned to cook.

Still, I ate much better here than in the hostel. Although cooking was not Zijun's forte, she threw herself into it heart and soul. Her ceaseless anxieties on this score made me anxious too, and in this way we shared the sweet and the bitter together. She kept at it so hard all day, perspiration made her short hair cling to her brows, and her hands began to grow rough.

And then she had to feed Asui and the chicks. . . . No one else could do this chore.

I told her I would rather go without food than see her work herself to the bone like this. She just glanced at me without a word, looking rather wistful, so that I couldn't very well say any more. But she went on working as hard as ever.

Finally the blow I had been expecting fell. The evening before the Double Tenth Festival, I was sitting idle while she washed the dishes when we heard a knock on the door. When I opened it, the messenger from our bureau handed me a mimeographed slip of paper. I had a good idea what it was and, when I took it to the lamp, sure enough it read:

> By order of the commissioner, Shi Juansheng is discharged.
>
> The secretariat, October 9th.

I had foreseen this while we were still in the hostel. Face-Cream, being one of the gambling friends of the commissioner's son, was bound to have spread rumours and tried to make trouble. I was only surprised that this hadn't happened sooner. In fact this was really no blow, because I had already decided that I could work as a clerk somewhere else or teach, or even, though it was more difficult, do some translation work. I knew

the editor of *Freedom's Friend*, and had corresponded with him a couple of months previously. But all the same, my heart was thumping. What distressed me most was that even Zijun, fearless as she was, had turned pale. Recently she seemed to be weaker, more faint-hearted.

"What does it matter?" she said. "We can make a fresh start. We. . . ."

Her voice trailed off and, to my ears, it failed to carry conviction. The lamplight, too, seemed unusually dim. Men are really ludicrous creatures, so easily upset by trifles. First we gazed at each other in silence, then started discussing what to do. Finally we decided to live as economically as possible on the money we had, to advertise in the paper for a post as clerk or teacher, and to write at the same time to the editor of *Freedom's Friend* explaining my present situation and asking him to accept a translation from me to help tide me over this difficult period.

"Suit the action to the word! Let's make a fresh start."

I went straight to the table and pushed aside the bottle of sesame oil and saucer of vinegar, while Zijun brought over the dim lamp. First I drew up the advertisement; then I made a selection of books to translate. I hadn't looked at my books since we moved house, and each volume was thick with dust. Last of all I wrote the letter.

I hesitated for a long time over the wording of the letter. When I stopped writing to think, and glanced at her in the dusky lamplight, she was looking very wistful again. I had never imagined a trifle like this could cause such a striking change in someone so firm and fearless as Zijun. She really had grown much weaker lately; this wasn't something that had just started that evening. More put out than ever, I had a sudden vision of a peaceful life — the quiet of my shabby room in the hostel flashed before my eyes, and I was just about to take a good look at it when I found myself back in the dusky lamplight again.

It took me a long time to finish the letter, a very lengthy letter. And I was so tired after writing it that I realized I must have grown weaker myself lately too. We decided to send

in the advertisement and post the letter the next day. Then with one accord we straightened up silently, as if conscious of each other's fortitude and strength, able to see new hope growing from this fresh beginning.

Indeed, this blow from outside infused new spirit into us. While in the bureau I had been like a wild bird in a cage, given just enough bird-seed by its captor to keep alive but not to thrive; doomed as time passed to lose the use of its wings, so that if ever released it would be unable to fly. Now, at any rate, I had got out of the cage. I must soar anew through the boundless sky before it was too late, before I had forgotten how to flap my wings.

Of course we could not expect results from a small advertisement right away. However, translating is not so simple either. You read something and think you understand it, but when you come to translate it difficulties crop up everywhere, and progress is very slow. Still, I was determined to do my best. In less than a fortnight, the edge of a fairly new dictionary was black with my fingerprints, which shows how seriously I took my work. The editor of *Freedom's Friend* had said that his magazine would never ignore a good manuscript.

Unfortunately, there was no room where I could be undisturbed, and Zijun was not as quiet or considerate as she had been. Our place was so cluttered up with dishes and bowls, so filled with smoke, that it was impossible to work steadily there. But of course I had only myself to blame for not being able to afford a study. On top of this there were Asui and the chicks. The chicks, moreover, had now grown into hens and were more of a bone of contention than ever between the two families.

Then there was the never-ending business of eating every day. All Zijun's energies seemed to go to this. One ate to earn and earned to eat, while Asui and the hens had to be fed too. Apparently she had forgotten all she had ever learned, and did not realize that she was interrupting my train of thought when she called me to meals. And although I sometimes showed a

little displeasure as I sat down, she paid no attention at all, just went on munching away quite unconcerned.

It took her five weeks to realize that my work could not be restricted by regular meal-times. When the realization came she was probably annoyed, but she said nothing. After that my work did go forward faster, and soon I had translated 50,000 words. I had only to polish the manuscript, and it could be sent in with two already completed shorter pieces to *Freedom's Friend*. Those meals were still a headache though. I didn't mind the dishes being cold, but there wasn't enough to go round. Although my appetite was much smaller than before now that I was sitting at home all day using my brain, even so there wasn't always even enough rice. It had been given to Asui, sometimes along with the mutton which I myself rarely had a chance of eating recently. Asui was so thin, she said, it was really pathetic; besides it made the landlady sneer at us. She couldn't stand being laughed at.

So there were only the hens to eat my left-overs. It was a long time before I realized this. I was very conscious however that my "place in nature,"* as Huxley describes it, was only somewhere between the peke and the hens.

Later on, after much argument and insistence, the hens started appearing on our table and we and Asui were able to enjoy them for over ten days. They were very thin though, because for a long time they had been fed only a few grains of sorghum a day. After that, life became much more peaceful. Only Zijun was very dispirited and often seemed sad and bored, or even sulky. How easily people change!

But we couldn't keep Asui either. We had stopped hoping for a letter from anywhere, and Zijun had long had not even a scrap of food with which to get him to beg or stand on his hindlegs. Besides, winter was fast approaching, and we didn't know what to do about a stove. His appetite had long been a

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* *Man's Place in Nature*, published in 1863, is one of T. H. Huxley's well-known works.

heavy liability, of which we were all too conscious. So even the dog had to go.

If we had tied a tag to him and put him on sale in the market, we might have made a few coppers. But neither of us could bring ourselves to do this. Finally I muffled his head in a cloth and took him outside the West Gate, where I let him loose. When he ran after me, I pushed him into a pit — not a very deep one.

When I got home, I found the place much more peaceful; but Zijun's tragic expression quite staggered me. I had never seen such a look on her face before. Of course it was because of Asui, but why take it so to heart? And I hadn't told her about pushing him into the pit.

That night, something icy crept into her tragic expression.

"Really!" I couldn't help blurting out. "What's got into you today, Zijun?"

"What?" She didn't even glance at me.

"The way you look. . . ."

"It's nothing — nothing at all."

Eventually I guessed from her behaviour that she considered me callous. Actually, when on my own I had managed all right, although too proud to mix much with family connections. Since my move I had become estranged from my former friends. But if I could only take wing and fly away, I still had plenty of ways to make a living. The wretchedness of my present life was largely due to her — getting rid of Asui was a case in point. But Zijun seemed too obtuse now even to understand that.

When I took an opportunity to hint this to her, she nodded as if she understood. But judging by her later behaviour, she either didn't take it in or else she didn't believe me.

The cold weather and her cold looks made it impossible for me to be comfortable at home. But where could I go? I could get away from her icy looks in the street and parks, but the cold wind there cut like a knife. Finally I found a haven in the public library.

Admission was free, and there were two stoves in the reading room. Although the fires were very low, the mere sight of the stoves made one warmer. There were no books worth reading: the old ones were out of date, and there were no new ones to speak of.

But I didn't go there to read. There were usually a few other people there, sometimes as many as a dozen, all thinly clad like me. We kept up a pretence of reading in order to keep out of the cold. This suited me down to the ground. In the streets you were liable to meet people you knew who would glance at you contemptuously, but here there was no uncalled-for trouble of that kind, because my acquaintances were all gathered round other stoves or warming themselves at the stoves in their own homes.

Although there were no books for me to read there, I found quiet in which to think. As I sat there alone thinking over the past, I realized that during the last half year, for love — blind love — I had neglected all the other important things in life. First and foremost, livelihood. A man must make a living before there can be any place for love. There must be a way out for those who struggle, and I hadn't yet forgotten how to flap my wings, although I was much weaker than before. . . .

The reading room and the readers gradually faded. I saw fishermen on the angry sea, soldiers in the trenches, dignitaries in their cars, speculators at the stock exchange, heroes in mountain forests, teachers on their platforms, night prowlers, thieves in the dark. . . . Zijun was nowhere near me. She had lost all her courage in her resentment over Asui and absorption in her cooking. The strange thing was that she didn't look particularly thin. . . .

It grew colder. The few lumps of slow-burning hard coal in the stove had at last burnt out, and it was closing time. I had to go back to Lucky Lane to expose myself to that icy look. Of late I had sometimes been met with warmth, but this only upset me more. One evening, I remember, from Zijun's eyes flashed the childlike look I had not seen for so long, as she reminded me with a smile of something that had happened at

the hostel. But there was a constant look of fear in her eyes as well. I knew she was worried by the fact that my behaviour recently had been colder than her own; so sometimes, to comfort her, I forced myself to talk and laugh. But each forced laugh and remark at once rang hollow. And the way this hollowness immediately re-echoed in my ears, like a hateful sneer, was more than I could bear.

Zijun may have felt this too, for after this she lost her wooden calm and, though she tried her best to hide it, often showed anxiety. She treated me, however, much more tenderly.

I wanted to speak to her plainly, but lacked the courage. Whenever I made up my mind to speak, the sight of those childlike eyes compelled me, for the time being, to force a smile. But my smile turned straightway into a sneer at myself and made me lose my cold composure.

After that she revived the old questions and started new tests, forcing me to give all sorts of hypocritical answers to show my affection for her. Hypocrisy became branded on my heart, so filling it with falseness that it was hard to breathe. I often felt, in my depression, that really great courage was needed to tell the truth; for a man who lacked courage and reconciled himself to hypocrisy could never open up a new path in life. What's more, he just could not exist.

Then Zijun started looking resentful. This happened for the first time one morning, one bitterly cold morning, or so I imagined. I laughed up my sleeve with freezing indignation. All the ideas and intelligent, fearless phrases she had learned were empty after all; yet she had no inkling of their emptiness. She had given up reading long ago, so did not understand that the first thing in life is to make a living and that to do this people must advance hand in hand, or else soldier on alone. All she could do was cling to someone else's clothing, making it hard for even a fighter to struggle, and bringing ruin on both.

I felt that our only hope lay in parting. She ought to make a clean break. The thought of her death occurred to me abruptly, but at once I reproached myself and felt remorse. Happily it

was morning, and there was plenty of time for me to tell her the truth. Whether or not we could make a fresh start depended on this.

I deliberately brought up the past. I spoke of literature, then of foreign authors and their works, of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *The Lady from the Sea*. I praised Nora for being strong-minded.... All this had been said the previous year in the shabby room in the hostel, but now it rang hollow. As the words left my mouth I could not free myself from the suspicion that an unseen urchin behind me was maliciously parroting everything I said.

She listened, nodding agreement, then was silent. And I wound up abruptly, the last echo of my voice vanishing in the emptiness.

"Yes," she said presently, after another silence. "But.... Juansheng, I feel you're a different person these days. Is that true? Tell me honestly."

This was a head-on blow. But taking a grip of myself, I explained my views and proposals: only by making a fresh start and building a new life could we both avoid ruin.

To clinch the matter I said firmly:

"...Besides, you can go boldly ahead now without any scruples. You asked me for the truth. You're right: we shouldn't be hypocritical. Well, the truth is it's because I don't love you any more. Actually, this makes it much better for you, because it'll be easier for you to go ahead without any regret...."

I was expecting a scene, but all that followed was silence. Her face turned ashen pale, as pale as death; but in a moment her colour came back and that childlike look darted from her eyes. She gazed around like a hungry or thirsty child searching for its kindly mother. But she only stared into space, fearfully avoiding my eyes.

The sight was more than I could stand. Fortunately it was still early. Braving the cold wind, I hurried to the public library.

There I saw *Freedom's Friend*, with my short articles in it. This took me by surprise and breathed a little fresh life into

me. "There are plenty of ways open to me," I reflected. "But things can't go on like this."

I started calling on old friends with whom I had long been out of touch, but didn't go more than once or twice. Naturally their rooms were warm, yet I felt chilled to the marrow. And in the evenings I huddled in a room colder than ice.

An icy needle was piercing my heart so that it kept aching numbly. "There are plenty of ways open to me," I reflected. "I haven't forgotten how to flap my wings." The thought of her death occurred to me abruptly, but at once I reproached myself and felt remorse.

In the library the new path ahead of me often flashed before my eyes. She had faced up bravely to the facts and boldly left this icy home. Left it, what's more, without any sense of grievance. Then light as a cloud I floated through the void, the blue sky above me and, below, mountain ranges, mighty oceans, sky-scrapers, battlefields, motor-cars, thoroughfares, rich men's mansions, bright busy shopping centres, and the dark night. . . .

What's more, indeed, I foresaw that this new life was just around the corner.

Somehow we managed to live through the fearful winter, a bitter Beijing winter. But like dragonflies caught by mischievous boys who tie them up to play with and torment at will, although we had come through alive we were prostrate — the end was only a matter of time.

I wrote three letters to the editor of *Freedom's Friend* before receiving a reply. The envelope contained nothing but two book tokens, one for twenty cents, the other for thirty cents. So my nine cents spent on postage to press for payment and my whole day without food had all gone for nothing.

Then what I had been expecting finally happened.

As winter gave place to spring and the wind became less icy, I spent more time roaming the streets, not getting home

generally before dark. On one such dark evening I came home listlessly as usual and, as usual, grew so depressed at the sight of our gate that my feet began to drag. Eventually, however, I reached my room. It was dark inside. As I groped for the matches and struck a light, the place seemed extraordinarily quiet and empty.

I was standing there in bewilderment, when the official's wife called me outside.

"Zijun's father came today and took her away," she said simply.

This was not what I had expected. I felt as if hit on the back of the head, and stood speechless.

"She went?" I finally managed to ask.

"Yes."

"Did — did she say anything?"

"No. Just asked me to tell you when you came back that she'd gone."

I couldn't believe it; yet the room was extraordinarily quiet and empty. I gazed around in search of Zijun, but all I could see were some shabby sticks of furniture scattered sparsely about the room, as if to prove their inability to conceal anyone or anything. It occurred to me that she might have left a letter or at least jotted down a few words, but no. Only salt, dried chilli, flour and half a cabbage had been placed together, with a few dozen coppers at the side. These were all our worldly goods, and now she had solemnly left these all to me, mutely bidding me to use them to eke out my existence a little longer.

As if repelled by my surroundings, I hurried out to the middle of the courtyard where all around me was dark. Bright lamplight showed on the window-paper of the central room, where they were teasing the baby to make her laugh. My heart grew calmer as by degrees I glimpsed a way out of this heavy oppression: high mountains and marshlands, thoroughfares, brightly lit banquets, trenches, pitch-black night, the thrust of a sharp knife, utterly noiseless footsteps. . . .

Relaxing, I thought about travelling expenses and sighed.

As I lay with closed eyes I conjured up a picture of the future, but before the night was half over it had vanished. In the gloom I suddenly seemed to see a pile of groceries, then Zijun's ashen face appeared to gaze at me beseechingly with childlike eyes. But as soon as I pulled myself together, there was nothing there.

However, my heart was still heavy. Why couldn't I have waited a few days instead of blurting out the truth to her like that? Now she knew all that was left to her was the blazing fury of her father — to his children he was a heartless creditor — and the cold looks of bystanders, colder than frost or ice. Apart from this there was only emptiness. What a fearful thing it is to bear the heavy burden of emptiness, walking what is called one's path in life amid cold looks and blazing fury! This path ends, moreover, in nothing but a grave without so much as a tombstone.

I ought not to have told Zijun the truth. Since we had loved each other, I should have indulged her to the last with lies. If truth is precious, it should not have proved such a heavy burden of emptiness to Zijun. Of course lies are empty too, but at least they would not have proved so crushing a burden in the end.

I had imagined that if I told Zijun the truth she could go forward boldly without scruples, just as when we started living together. But I must have been wrong. Her courage and fearlessness then were owing to love.

Lacking the courage to shoulder the heavy burden of hypocrisy, I thrust the burden of the truth on to her. Because she had loved me she would have to bear this heavy burden amid cold looks and blazing fury to the end of her days.

I had thought of her death. . . . I saw that I was a weakling who deserved to be cast out by the strong, honest men and hypocrites both. Yet she, from first to last, had hoped that I could eke out my existence. . . .

I must leave Lucky Lane, which was so extraordinarily empty and lonely. To my mind, if only I could get away, it would

be as if Zijun were still at my side; or at least as if she were still in town and might drop in on me at any time, as she had when I lived in the hostel.

However, all my letters went unanswered, as did applications to friends to find me a post. There was nothing for it but to seek out a family connection whom I had not visited for a long time. This was an old classmate of my uncle's, a highly respected senior licentiate* who had lived in Beijing for many years and had a wide circle of acquaintances.

The gatekeeper eyed me scornfully, no doubt on account of my shabby clothes. When finally I was admitted, my uncle's friend still acknowledged our acquaintance but treated me very coldly. He knew all about us.

"Obviously you can't stay here," he told me coldly, after being asked to recommend me to a job elsewhere. "But where will you go? It's extremely difficult. . . . That, h'm, that friend of yours, Zijun, I suppose you know, is dead."

I was dumbfounded.

"Are you sure?" I blurted out at last.

He laughed drily. "Of course I am. My servant Wang Sheng comes from the same village as her family."

"But — how did she die?"

"Who knows? At any rate, she's dead."

I have forgotten how I took my leave and went home. I knew he wouldn't tell a lie. Zijun would never come back as she had last year. Although she had thought to bear the burden of emptiness amid cold looks and blazing fury till the end of her days, it had been too much for her. Fate had decreed that she should die believing the truth I had told her — die in a world without love.

Obviously I could not stay there. But where could I go?

Around me was a great void and deathlike silence. I seemed to see the darkness before the eyes of those, each one in turn,

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* A successful candidate of a certain grade in the official examination system of the Qing Dynasty.

who died unloved; to hear all their bitter, despairing cries as they struggled.

I was waiting for something new, something nameless and unexpected. But day after day passed in the same deathlike silence.

I went out much less than before, sitting or lying in the great void, allowing this deathlike silence to eat away my soul. Sometimes the silence itself seemed afraid, seemed to recoil. At such times there flashed into my mind nameless, unexpected new hope.

One overcast morning when the sun had failed to struggle out from behind the clouds and the very air was tired, sounds of pattering paws and snuffling made me open my eyes. A glance around the room revealed nothing, but looking down I saw a tiny creature perambulating the floor. It was thin, covered with dust, more dead than alive. . . .

When I took a closer look, my heart missed a beat. I jumped up.

It was Asui. He had come back.

I left Lucky Lane not just because of the cold glances of my landlord, his wife and their maid, but largely on account of Asui. But where could I go? There were many ways open to me of course, this I knew, and sometimes I glimpsed them stretching out before me. What I didn't know was how to take the first step.

After much cogitation and weighing of pros and cons, I decided that the hostel was the only possible lodging place for me. Here is the same shabby room as before, the same wooden bed, half-withered locust tree and wistaria vine. But all that formerly gave me love and life, hope and happiness, has vanished. Nothing remains but emptiness, the empty existence I exchanged for the truth.

There are many ways open to me and I must take one of them, because I am still living. I still don't know, though, how

to take the first step. Sometimes the road seems like a great grey serpent, writhing and darting at me. I wait and wait, watching it approach, but it always vanishes suddenly in the darkness.

The early spring nights are as long as ever. Sitting idle as the time drags, I recall a funeral procession I saw in the street this morning. There were paper figures and paper horses in front and, behind, weeping like singing. Now I see how clever they are — this is so simple.

Then Zijun's funeral springs to my mind. She bore the heavy burden of emptiness alone, advancing down the long grey road only to be swallowed up amid cold looks and blazing fury.

If only there really were ghosts, really were a hell! Then, no matter how the infernal whirlwind roared, I would seek out Zijun to tell her of my remorse and grief, to beg for her forgiveness. Failing this, the poisonous flames of hell would engulf me and fiercely consume all my remorse and grief.

In the whirlwind and flames I would put my arms round Zijun and ask her pardon, or let her take her revenge. . . .

However, this is emptier than my new life. I have nothing now but the early spring night which is still as long as ever. Since I am living, I must make a fresh start. And the first step is just to record my remorse and grief, for Zijun's sake as well as for my own.

All I have is weeping like singing as I mourn for Zijun, burying her in oblivion.

I want to forget. For my own sake, I do not want to remember the oblivion I gave Zijun for her burial.

I must make a fresh start in life. Hiding the truth deep in my wounded heart, I must advance silently, taking oblivion and falsehood as my guide. . . .

October 21, 1925

BROTHERS

There was never any business to transact in the Public Welfare Bureau, where several civil servants were as usual discussing family affairs in the office. Qin Yitang, hookah in hand, started coughing so convulsively that the conversation broke off. After some time he raised his swollen purple face and gasped:

"And yesterday they started fighting, fighting all the way from the main hall to the gate. I couldn't stop them, no matter how I shouted." His lips and sparse white beard quivered. "Number Three said the money Number Five had spent on government bonds couldn't be charged to the family account, he should repay it. . . ."

"See, money again." Zhang Peijun bounded up from the chaise-longue, his eyes in their deep sockets flashing compassionately. "I really can't understand why brothers squabble like this over trifles. What difference do these things make anyway?"

"Other people aren't like you and your brother," replied Yitang.

"We don't squabble, but share and share alike. Money and property aren't things we worry about. That's why we never have any trouble. Whenever any family wants to divide the property, I always tell them how it is with us, and urge them not to squabble. If you just explain things to your honourable sons, Brother Yi. . . ."

"Impossible." Yitang shook his head.

"I'm afraid that wouldn't work," said Wang Yuesheng, looking Peijun admiringly in the eyes. "You and your brother are really exceptional; I've met no others like you. Neither of you has the least thought of self — that's not easy. . . ."

"They fought all the way from the hall to the gate . . ." reiterated Yitang.

"Is your honourable younger brother still as busy as ever?"

"He still has eighteen hours of classes a week, and on top of that ninety-three essays to correct, simply more than he can cope with. But the last few days he's asked for leave. He's feverish, most likely caught a chill."

"I think he'd better be careful," said Yuesheng gravely. "According to today's paper, there's an epidemic now. . . ."

"What epidemic?" asked Peijun hastily, taken aback.

"I can't say for sure. Some kind of fever, as far as I remember."

Peijun hurried to the reading-room.

"They're really exceptional," said Yuesheng admiringly to Qin Yitang, as he watched Peijun hurry away. "The two of them seem just like one. If all brothers were the same, there would never be any family rows. I wish I could emulate them, but I can't."

"Says the money spent on government bonds can't be charged to the family account . . ." fumed Yitang, as he stuck a spill in the spill-holder.

There was quiet in the office for a while, till it was broken by the sound of Peijun's steps and his call to the orderly. He sounded as if confronted by disaster, stuttering, his voice quavering. He told the orderly to ring up Putisi, Dr. Pu, and ask him to go at once to Zhang Peijun's flat in the Tongxing Mansions to see a patient.

Yuesheng realized how worried he must be, because although he had faith in Western doctors his salary was low and normally he economized, yet now he was calling in this most celebrated doctor whose fees were high. Going out to meet him, he saw that his face was pale as he stood outside listening while the orderly telephoned.

"Well?"

"The papers say . . . there's an epidemic of scarlet . . . scarlet fever. I . . . when I came to the office after lunch, Jingfu's face was a hectic red. . . . He's gone out? Ask them . . .

to ring him up and ask him to go at once to the Tongxing Mansions, the Tongxing Mansions. . . ."

Having heard the orderly pass on this message, he dashed into the office to pick up his hat. Wang Yuesheng, sharing his anxiety, followed him in.

"When the commissioner comes, please ask leave for me. Tell him one of my family's ill and I'm getting a doctor . . ." he said, nodding at random.

"Just go along. The commissioner may not be coming," said Yuesheng.

But he had already dashed off, as if without having heard.

In the street, he did not bargain in his usual way for a rickshaw. As soon as he saw a sturdy rickshaw man who looked like a good runner, he asked the price and got in, saying, "All right. As long as you hurry!"

His block of flats, as usual, was peaceful and quiet. A young attendant was still sitting outside the gate fiddling. When he entered his brother's bedroom, his heart beat even faster, for his face seemed a more hectic red and he was panting for breath. Peijun felt his forehead — it burned to his touch.

"What illness can this be? Not serious is it?" asked Jingfu, his eyes bright with anxiety.

"No, it's not serious . . . a cold," Peijun stammered.

Normally he loved to debunk superstition, but now he sensed something ill-omened in Jingfu's appearance and question, as if the patient himself had some premonition. This notion upset him still more. At once he left the room, softly called the attendant, and told him to telephone to the hospital: Had Dr. Pu been found?

"I see, I see. They haven't traced him yet," said the attendant by the telephone.

Peijun could not sit quietly, by now he could not even stand steadily; but in his anxiety he hit on a gleam of hope: this might not be scarlet fever. However, they had not found Dr. Pu. . . . Bai Wenshan in that block of flats was a Chinese doctor, but he might be able to diagnose the illness. How-

ever, several times when talking to him, Peijun had attacked traditional Chinese medicine; besides, he'd already asked several times for the Western doctor, who might have had a telephone call by this time. . . .

But in the end he went to call in Bai Wenshan.

Evidently Bai Wenshan bore him no grudge. He promptly put on his dark glasses with tortoise-shell rims, and went with him to Jingfu's room. Having felt his pulse and examined his face, he undid his clothes to look at his chest, then slowly took his leave. Peijun followed him back to his room.

He invited Peijun to sit down, but then said nothing.

"Brother Wenshan, what's wrong with my brother?" Peijun blurted out.

"Red rash. You saw how the spots had come out."

"Then it's not scarlet fever?" Peijun took heart.

"Western doctors call it scarlet fever. We Chinese doctors call it red rash."

At once his hands and feet turned cold.

"Is there a cure?" he asked frantically.

"Yes. But it also depends on your family's luck."

He was too stupefied to grasp how he asked Bai Wenshan to make out a prescription or how he left his room; but when he passed the telephone he remembered Dr. Pu. Once more he rang up the hospital, only to learn that the doctor had been found but was too busy to call until late — maybe not until the next morning. He urged them to ask him to come that day without fail.

When he went in and lit the lamp, he found Jingfu's face a still more hectic red, and more red spots had certainly appeared. His face and eyes were puffy too. He sat down, but felt as if sitting on needles. In the growing silence of the night, in his desperation he distinctly heard the honking of each car; and once, thinking this must be Dr. Pu's car, he leapt up to go and meet him. But before he reached the gate, the car had already driven past. Turning back, disappointed, as he crossed the yard he saw that the bright moon had risen in the west, and his

neighbour's old locust tree was casting a shadow on the ground, so murky that it added to his gloom.

Suddenly a crow cawed. A familiar sound, as there were three or four crows' nests in the old locust tree. But now he was so appalled that he nearly stopped dead. Tiptoeing fearfully into Jingfu's room, he found him lying with closed eyes, his whole face apparently swollen. But he was not asleep, for he suddenly opened his eyes, no doubt on hearing footsteps. In the lamplight his eyes glittered strangely, disconsolately.

"A letter?" Jingfu asked.

"No, no. It's me," he stuttered, startled and rather at a loss. "It's me. I'm still going to fetch a Western doctor, to speed up your cure. He hasn't come yet. . . ."

Jingfu closed his eyes without answering. His brother sat by the desk in front of the window. All that could be heard in the silence was the patient's gasping breath and the ticking of the alarm-clock. Suddenly a car honked in the distance. At once he tensed. He heard it come nearer and nearer. It must surely be reaching the gate now and going to stop. But the next second he heard it drive past. When this had happened a number of times, he could tell the difference between various horns: some sounded like whistling, others like drumming, farting, dogs barking, ducks quacking, cows mooing, hens squawking, sobbing. . . . He felt a sudden self-reproach: why hadn't he paid attention earlier, so that he could recognize Dr. Pu's horn?

The tenant who lived opposite was, as usual, still out at an opera or bawdy-house. But it was already very late, and cars were few and far between now. Brilliant silver moonlight whitened the window-paper.

Tired out with waiting, his tension relaxed by degrees, until he stopped paying attention to the horns. But wild fancies seized this chance to cross his mind. It seemed to him certain that Jingfu had scarlet fever, and it was incurable. In that case how was he, on his own, to support the family? Although the town where they lived was small, prices were going up. . . . It would be hard enough feeding his own three children and

Jingfu's two, and how could they go to school? If one or two only had a chance to study, then of course his Kang'er was the most intelligent — but people were bound to protest that he was ill-treating his brother's children. . . .

How to manage the funeral? He couldn't even afford to buy a coffin, so how could he have it sent to their old home? He'd have to deposit it for the time being in the public mortuary.

Abruptly, he heard distant footsteps approaching. At once he jumped up and went out, knowing that this was the tenant who lived opposite.

"The First Emperor in Baidi City. . . ."*

The sound of this soft, cheerful singing disappointed and exasperated him. He nearly charged over to curse him. But then he saw the attendant holding a lantern which lit up a pair of leather shoes behind, and in the faint light above was a tall man with a white face and black beard and whiskers. It was Putisi.

As if he had found a treasure, he flew forward to lead him to the patient's room. They stood in front of the bed, which he lit up by bringing over the lamp.

"He's feverish, sir . . ." Peijun gasped.

"Since when? How long?" Putisi demanded slowly, his hands in his trouser pockets.

"The day before yesterday. No . . . three days ago."

Dr. Pu said nothing, but cursorily felt his pulse. Then he told Peijun to hold the lamp higher so that he could look at the patient's face. He also told him to draw back the quilt and unbutton his jacket. After looking at his chest, he reached over to feel his stomach.

"Measles," he said softly, as if to himself.

"Measles?" quavered Peijun in astonished relief.

"Measles."

"Just measles?"

---

* A phrase from an opera about Liu Bei, the first emperor of Han, who died in Baidi City in Sichuan.

"Yes."

"Haven't you had measles before?"

Elatedly, he was just asking Jingfu this when Dr. Pu walked over to the desk, and he had to follow him. He saw him put one foot on the chair, pull over a sheet of stationery, and take from his pocket a pencil stub. With this he scrawled a few almost illegible characters — the prescription.

"Won't the pharmacies have closed by now?" asked Peijun as he took this.

"Tomorrow will do. He can take that medicine tomorrow."

"Will you come again tomorrow? . . ."

"There's no need. He mustn't eat anything acid, peppery or salty. When his fever has gone, bring me a specimen of his urine. Take it to the hospital for a test, that's all. Put it in a clean glass bottle with his name on it."

While speaking Dr. Pu started out, stuffing into his pocket the five-yuan note handed to him. He went straight to the gate. Having seen him out, Peijun watched him get into his car and start it up. He then turned and was re-entering the gate when he heard two honks behind him and discovered that Putisi's horn sounded like a bull bellowing. But the knowledge was of no use to him now, he reflected.

In the bedroom even the lamplight looked cheerful now. Peijun felt he had done all that could be done. All around was very peaceful, yet his heart seemed strangely empty. He gave the prescription and the money for it to the attendant who had followed him in, telling him to go first thing in the morning to the Meiya Pharmacy to buy the medicine. Because this was the pharmacy recommended by Dr. Pu as the only one with reliable drugs.

"Meiya Pharmacy in the east city! Mind you go there. Remember: Meiya Pharmacy!" he said following the attendant out again.

The courtyard was flooded with moonlight, silver-white. His neighbour was asleep in "Baidi City," and all was very still. Only the alarm-clock on the desk was ticking cheerfully and steadily. The patient's breathing, although audible, was

very regular too. Before he had sat there long, his spirits rose again.

"You've never had measles in all these years?" he asked incredulously, as if this were miraculous.

"..."

"You wouldn't remember. We should have had to ask mother."

"..."

"But she isn't here. So you never had measles!" He laughed heartily.

When Peijun woke in his bed, the morning sun shining through the window-paper stung his sleepy eyes. But he could not move, he felt too limp, and his back was still clammy with cold sweat. Besides, standing by the bed he saw a child, her face streaming with blood, whom he was about to beat.

But in a flash this apparition vanished, and he was sleeping alone with no one else in his room. He pulled off his pillowcase to wipe the sweat from his chest and back, then dressed. By the time he headed for Jingfu's room, he saw his "Baidi City" neighbour rinsing his mouth in the courtyard, and knew that it was already fairly late.

Jingfu had woken too, and was lying in bed open-eyed.

"How do you feel today?" he promptly asked.

"Better..."

"Hasn't the medicine come yet?"

"No."

He sat down by the desk, facing the bed, and saw that Jingfu's face was less red than the previous day. But his own head still felt muddled, and fragments of his dream kept flashing before him:

— Jingfu was lying like this, but he was a corpse. He hastily laid him out and carried the coffin on his back all the way from outside the gate to the main hall. The place seemed to be their old home. He fancied he saw many acquaintances standing on either side praising him...

— He ordered Kang'er and his younger brother and sister

to go to school; but two other sobbing children clamoured to go with them. Their sobbing got on his nerves, but at the same time he felt that he had absolute power and great strength. He saw the palm of his hand, three or four times bigger than normal and hard as iron, slap Hesheng on the face. . . .

Afraid of these vestiges of his dream which assailed him, he wanted to stand up and leave the room, but could not move. He also wanted to suppress and forget these dream fragments; but they seemed like goose-feathers plunged into the water, which after floating round several times finally surfaced again.

— Hesheng came in sobbing, his face streaming with blood. He jumped onto the shrine. . . . Behind the child trooped a crowd of people, some known to him, some strangers. All come to attack him, he knew.

— "I would never be so heartless. Don't be taken in by the children's lies," he heard himself saying.

— Hesheng was beside him. He raised his palm again. . . .

He suddenly came to his senses. He felt worn out and his back still seemed clammy. Jingfu was lying quietly opposite. His breathing, although rapid, was regular. The clock on the desk seemed to be ticking more loudly.

He wheeled round to face the desk which was covered with dust. When he turned to look at the window, the calendar hanging on the wall had printed on it in clerical script: Twenty-seven.

The attendant brought in the medicine, as well as a parcel — a book.

"What's that?" asked Jingfu, opening his eyes.

"Your medicine," he answered, roused from his stupefaction.

"No, that parcel."

"Never mind that now. Take your medicine first." Only after giving Jingfu his medicine did he pick up the parcel. "Suoshi sent this," he said. "It must be the volume of *Sesame and Lilies** that you asked him to lend you."

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* A collection of essays by John Ruskin (1819-1900).

Jingfu reached out for the book, but simply glanced at the cover and ran his fingers over the gold letters on the spine, then put it down by his pillow and closed his eyes in silence. Presently he murmured happily:

"When I'm better, I shall translate a little and send it to the Culture Library to earn a bit of money. That is, if they'll accept it. . . ."

Today, Peijun arrived at the Public Welfare Bureau much later than usual, after noon. The office was already wreathed with smoke from Qin Yitang's hookah. Wang Yuesheng, seeing him in the distance, came out to meet him.

"Ah! You've come. Is your honourable younger brother better? I didn't think it could be serious. Every year there are these epidemics, which don't amount to much. Yitang and I were talking about you, wondering why you hadn't come. Now here you are, good! But you look a little off colour . . . you weren't like this yesterday."

To Peijun, this office and his colleagues had also changed since the previous day and seemed strange. Although everything there was familiar: the broken clothes-hanger, the spittoon cracked at the edge, the clutter of dusty files, the rickety chaise-longue with its broken leg, and Qin Yitang lying back on it with his hookah, coughing, shaking his head and sighing. . . .

"They kept it up all the way from the hall to the gate. . . ."

"That's why," rejoined Yuesheng, "you should tell them about Brother Pei, get them to learn from him. Otherwise, they'll really make you die of rage, old fellow. . . ."

"Number Three says the money Number Five spent on government bonds can't be charged to the family, he should . . . should. . . ." Yitang doubled up, coughing.

"How true it is that 'the hearts of men differ' . . ." Yuesheng turned towards Peijun. "So your honourable brother is all right?"

"He's all right. According to the doctor, it's measles."

"Measles? Yes, all the children outside are getting measles. The three in the compound where I live have all come down with it. It's nothing serious. But to think how worried you were yesterday! People seeing you couldn't help being moved. Yours is truly a case of 'brotherly harmony.' "*

"Did the commissioner show up yesterday?"

"No, still not a sign — 'gone like the yellow stork.'** Go and sign the register and that will be that."

"Says he should repay it," muttered Yitang to himself. "These government bonds are a menace, you don't know where you are with them. Touch them and you land in trouble. Up to yesterday evening, they were still fighting from the hall to the gate. Number Three has two more children in school, and Number Five is furious, claiming he's used more of the family money. . . ."

"That complicates matters still more!" Yuesheng sounded disappointed. "So when I look at you and your brother, Peijun, I 'fall prostrate in admiration.' Believe me, that's the truth, I'm not flattering you to your face — no, indeed."

Peijun said nothing as he saw the orderly bring in a dispatch, which he stepped forward to take. Yuesheng followed and read it out as he held it:

"Hao Shangshan and other citizens petition: 'In the eastern suburb an unknown male has died. Your bureau is requested to issue a coffin at once and have him buried, in the interest of hygiene and the public welfare.' I'll see to that. You'd better go home early, you must be worried about your brother's illness. You two are really 'pied wagtails in the wasteland.' . . ."***

"No!" He kept hold of the dispatch. "I'll see to it."

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* A phrase from *The Analects of Confucius.*

** An allusion to a poem by Cui Hao of the Tang Dynasty.

*** A poem in the *Book of Songs* has the lines: Pied wagtails in the wasteland; brothers are concerned for each other's difficulties.

Yuesheng did not insist. Peijun, looking very much at ease, walked quietly to his desk, read the petition, and reached out to remove the cover from his black ink-box blotched with patina.

November 3, 1925

THE DIVORCE

"Ah, Uncle Mu! A happy New Year and good luck to you!"

"How are you, Basan? Happy New Year!"

"Happy New Year! So Aigu's here as well."

"Well met, Grandad Mu!"

As Zhuang Musan and his daughter Aigu stepped down into the boat from Magnolia Bridge Wharf a hum of voices broke out on board. Some of the passengers clasped their hands and bowed, and four places were vacated on the benches of the cabin. Calling out greetings, Zhuang Musan sat down, leaning his long pipe against the side of the boat. Aigu sat on his left opposite Basan, her scythe-shaped feet fanning out to form a V.

"Going into town, Grandad Mu?" asked a man with a ruddy face like the shell of a crab.

"Not to town." Grandad Mu sounded rather dispirited. But his dark red face was so wrinkled in any case that he looked much the same as usual. "We're making a trip to Pang Village."

All on board stopped talking to stare at them.

"Is it Aigu's business again?" asked Basan at last.

"It is. . . . This affair will be the death of me. It's dragged on now for three years. We've quarrelled and patched it up time after time; yet still the thing isn't settled. . . ."

"Will you be going to Mr. Wei's house again?"

"That's right. This won't be the first time he's acted as peace-maker; but I've never agreed to his terms. Not that it matters. Their family's having their New Year reunion now. Even Seventh Master from the city will be there."

"Seventh Master?" Basan opened his eyes very wide. "So

he'll be there to put his word in too, eh? . . . Well. . . . As a matter of fact, since we pulled down their kitchen range last year we've had our revenge more or less. Besides, there's really no point in Aigu going back there." He lowered his eyes again.

"I'm not set on going back there, Brother Basan!" Aigu looked up indignantly. "I'm doing this to spite them. Just think! Young Beast carried on with that little widow and decided he didn't want me. But is it as simple as that? Old Beast just egged on his son and tried to get rid of me too — as if it were all that easy! What about Seventh Master? Just because he exchanges cards with the magistrate, does that mean he can't talk our language? He can't be such a blockhead as Mr. Wei, who says nothing but: 'Separate, better separate.' I'll tell him what I've had to put up with all these years, and we'll see who he says is right!"

Basan was convinced, and kept his mouth shut.

The boat was very quiet, with no sound but the plash of water against the bow. Zhuang Musan reached for his pipe and filled it.

A fat man sitting opposite, next to Basan, rummaged in his girdle for a flint and struck a light, which he held to Zhuang Musan's pipe.

"Thank you, thank you," said Zhuang Musan, nodding to him.

"Though this is the first time we've met," said the fat man respectfully, "I heard of you long ago. Yes, who is there in all the eighteen villages by the coast who doesn't know of Uncle Mu? We've known too for some time that Young Shi was carrying on with a little widow. When you took your six sons to tear down their kitchen range last year, who didn't say you were right? . . . All the big gates open for you, you have plenty of face. Why be afraid of *them*?"

"This uncle is a truly discerning man," said Aigu approvingly. "I don't know who he is, though."

"My name is Wang Degui," replied the fat man promptly.

"They can't just push me out! I don't care whether it's

Seventh Master or Eighth Master. I'll go on making trouble till their family's ruined and all of them are dead! Mr. Wei has been at me four times, hasn't he? Even Dad's been thrown off his balance by the sight of that settlement money. . . ."

Zhuang Musan swore softly to himself.

"But, Grandad Mu, didn't the Shi family send Mr. Wei a whole feast at the end of last year?" asked Crab-face.

"Makes no difference," said Wang Degui. "Can a feast blind a man completely? If so, what happens when you send him a foreign banquet? Those scholars who know the truth will always stick up for justice. If anyone's bullied by everyone else, for instance, they will up and speak for him no matter whether there's wine to be had or not. At the end of last year, Mr. Rong of our humble village came back from Beijing. He's one who has seen the great world, not like us villagers. He said that a Madame Guang there, who's the best. . . ."

"Wang Jetty!" shouted the boatmen, preparing to moor. "Any passengers for Wang Jetty?"

"Here, me!" Fatty grabbed his pipe, and darted out of the cabin, jumping ashore just as the boat drew in.

"Excuse me!" he called back with a nod to the passengers.

The boat rowed on in fresh silence, broken only by the plash of water. Basan began to doze off, facing Aigu's scythe-shaped shoes, and his mouth fell open by degrees. The two old women in the front cabin began softly chanting Buddhist prayers and telling their beads. They looked at Aigu and exchanged significant glances, pursing their lips and nodding.

Aigu was staring at the awning above her, probably considering how best to raise such trouble that Old Beast's family would be ruined and he and Young Beast would have no way to turn. She was not afraid of Mr. Wei. She had seen him twice and he was nothing but a squat, round-headed fellow — there were plenty like him in her own village, only a little darker.

Zhuang Musan had come to the end of his tobacco, and the oil in the pipe was sputtering, but still he went on puffing.

He knew the stop after Wang Jetty was Pang Village. Already, in fact, you could see Literary Star Pavilion at the entrance to the village. He had been here so often it was not worth talking about, any more than Mr. Wei. He remembered how his daughter had come crying home, how badly her husband and father-in-law had behaved, and how they had worsted him. The past unfolded again before his eyes. Usually when he recalled how he had punished the evil-doers, he would give a bleak smile — but not this time. The fat form of Seventh Master had somehow intervened, and was squeezing his thoughts out of any semblance of order.

The boat went on in continued silence. Only the Buddhist prayers swelled in volume. Everyone else seemed sunk in thought like Aigu and her father.

"Here you are, Uncle Mu, Pang Village."

Roused by the boatman's voice, they looked up to see Literary Star Pavilion before them.

Zhuang jumped ashore, and Aigu followed him. They passed the pavilion and headed for Mr. Wei's house. After passing thirty houses on their way south, they turned a corner and reached their destination. Four boats with black awnings were moored in a row at the gate.

As they stepped through the great, black-lacquered gate, they were asked into the gatehouse. It was full of boatmen and farmhands, who were seated at two tables. Aigu dared not stare at them, but she took one hasty look round, and saw there was not a sign of Old Beast and Young Beast.

When a servant brought in soup containing sweet New Year cakes, without knowing why, she felt even more uncomfortable and uneasy. "Just because he exchanges cards with the magistrate doesn't mean he can't talk our language, does it?" she thought. "These scholars who know the truth will always stick up for justice. I must tell Seventh Master the whole story, beginning from the time I married at the age of fifteen. . . ."

When she finished the soup, she knew the time was at hand. Sure enough, before long she found herself following one of

the farmhands, who ushered her and her father across the great hall, and round a corner into the reception room.

The room was so crammed with things she could not take in all it contained. There were many guests as well, whose short jackets of red and blue satin were shimmering all around her. And in the midst of them was a man who she knew at once must be Seventh Master. Though he had a round head and a round face too, he was a great deal bigger than Mr. Wei and the others. He had narrow slits of eyes in his great round face, and a wispy black moustache; and though he was bald his head and face were ruddy and glistening. Aigu was quite puzzled for a moment, then concluded he must have rubbed his skin with lard.

"This is an anus-stop,* which the ancients used in burials."

Seventh Master was holding something which looked like a corroded stone, and he rubbed his nose twice with this object as he spoke. "Unfortunately, it comes from a recent digging. Still, it's worth having: it can't be later than Han.** Look at this 'mercury stain.' . . ."***

The "mercury stain" was at once surrounded by several heads, one of which, of course, was Mr. Wei's. There were several sons of the house as well, whom Aigu had not yet noticed, for so awed were they by Seventh Master that they looked like flattened bedbugs.

She did not understand all he had just said; she was not interested in this "mercury stain," nor did she dare investigate it; so she took this chance instead to look round. Standing behind her by the wall, close to the door, were both Old Beast and Young Beast. She saw at a glance that they looked older than when she had met them by chance half a year ago.

Then everybody drifted away from the "mercury stain."

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* It was the custom for small pieces of jade to be inserted in a dead man's orifices, for people believed this prevented the corpse from decaying.

** The Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.).

*** The jade and metal objects found in tombs are often stained with mercury, which was placed in corpses to prevent them from decaying too rapidly.

Mr. Wei took the anus-stop and sat down to stroke it, turning to ask Zhuang Musan:

"Did just the two of you come?"

"Just the two of us."

"Why have none of your sons come?"

"They hadn't time."

"We wouldn't have troubled you to come at New Year, if not for this business.... I'm sure you've had enough of it yourself. It's over two years now, isn't it? Better to remove enmity than keep it, I say. Since Aigu's husband didn't get on with her, and his parents didn't like her ... better take the advice I gave you before and let them separate. I haven't enough face to convince you. But Seventh Master, you know, is a champion of justice. And Seventh Master's view is the same as mine. However, he says both sides must make some concessions, and he's told the Shi family to add another ten dollars to the settlement, making it ninety dollars!"

"..."

"Ninety dollars! If you took the case right up to the emperor, you couldn't get such favourable terms. Nobody but Seventh Master would make such a handsome offer!"

Seventh Master widened his slits of eyes to nod at Zhuang Musan.

Aigu saw that the situation was critical and marvelled that her father, of whom all the coastal families stood in awe, should have not a word to say for himself here. This was quite uncalled for, she thought. Although she could not follow all Seventh Master said, he somehow struck her as a kindly old soul, not nearly as frightening as she had imagined.

"Seventh Master's a scholar who knows the truth," she said boldly. "He's not like us country folk. I had no one to complain to of all the wrong that's been done me; but now I'll tell Seventh Master. All the time I was married I tried to be a good wife — I bowed my head as I went in and out, and I didn't fail in a single wifely duty. But they kept finding fault with me — each one was a regular bully. That year the weasel killed that big cock, how could they blame me for not

closing the coop? It was that mangy cur — curse it! — who pushed open the door of the coop to steal some rice mixed with husks. But that Young Beast wouldn't distinguish black from white. He gave me a slap on the cheek. . . ."

Seventh Master looked at her.

"I knew there must be a reason. This is something Seventh Master will not fail to notice, for scholars who know the truth know everything. He was bewitched by that bitch, and wanted to drive me away! I married him with the proper ceremonies — three lots of tea and six presents — and was carried to his house in a bridal sedan! Is it so easy for him to toss me aside? . . . I mean to show them, I don't mind going to court. If it can't be settled at the district court, we'll go to the prefecture. . . ."

"Seventh Master knows all this," said Mr. Wei, looking up. "If you persist in this attitude, Aigu, it won't be to your advantage. You haven't changed in the least. Look, how sensible your father is! It's a pity you and your brothers aren't like him. Suppose you do take this matter to the prefect, won't he consult Seventh Master? But then the case will be dealt with publicly, and nobody's feelings will be spared. . . . That being so. . . ."

"I'll stake my life if need be, even if it ruins both families!"

"There's no need for such desperate measures," put in Seventh Master slowly. "You're still young. We should all keep the peace. 'Peace breeds wealth.' Isn't that true? I've added a whole ten dollars: that's more than generous. For if your father-in-law and mother-in-law say 'Go!' then go you must. Don't talk about the prefecture, this would be the same in Shanghai, Beijing or even abroad. If you don't believe me, ask *him*! He's just come back from the foreign school in Beijing." He turned towards a sharp-chinned son of the house. "Isn't that so?" he asked.

"Ab-so-lutely," Sharp-chin hastily straightened up to answer in low, respectful tones.

Aigu felt completely isolated. Her father refused to speak, her brothers had not dared come, Mr. Wei had always been

on the other side, and now Seventh Master had failed her, while even this young sharp-chin, with his soft talk and air of a flattened bug, was simply saying what was expected of him. But confused as she was, she resolved to make a last stand.

"What, does even Seventh Master. . . ." Her eyes showed surprise and disappointment. "Yes . . . I know, we rough folk are ignorant. My father's to blame for not even understanding how to deal with people — he's lost his old wits completely. He let Old Beast and Young Beast have their way in everything. They stoop to every means, however foul, to fawn on those above them. . . ."

"Look at her, Seventh Master!" Young Beast, who had been standing silently behind her, suddenly spoke up now. "She dares act like this even in Seventh Master's presence. At home she gave us simply no peace at all. She calls my father Old Beast and me Young Beast or Bastard."

"Who the devil is calling you a bastard?" Aigu rounded on him fiercely, then turned back to Seventh Master. "I've something else I'd like to say in public. He was always mean to me. It was 'slut' and 'bitch' all the time. After he started carrying on with that whore, he even cursed my ancestors. Judge between us, Seventh Master. . . ."

She gave a start, and the words died on her lips, for suddenly Seventh Master rolled his eyes and lifted his round face. From the mouth framed by that wispy moustache issued a shrill, trailing cry:

"Come here! . . ."

Her heart, which had missed a beat, suddenly started pounding. The battle was lost, the tables were turned it seemed. She had taken a false step and fallen into the water, and she knew it was all her own fault.

A man in a blue gown and black jacket promptly came in, and stood like a stick with his arms at his side in front of Seventh Master.

There was not a cheep in the room. Seventh Master moved his lips, but nobody could hear what he was saying. Only his servant heard, and the force of this order entered his very

marrows, for twice he twitched as if overcome by awe. And he answered:

"Very good, sir."

Then he backed away several paces, turned and went out.

Aigu knew that something unexpected and completely unforeseen was about to happen — something which she was powerless to prevent. Only now did she realize the full power of Seventh Master. She had been mistaken before, and acted too rashly and rudely. She repented bitterly, and found herself saying:

"I always meant to accept Seventh Master's decision. . . ."

There was not a cheep in the room. Although her words were as soft as strands of silk, they carried like a thunder-clap to Mr. Wei.

"Good!" he exclaimed approvingly, leaping up. "Seventh Master is truly just, and Aigu is truly reasonable. In that case, Musan, you can't have any objection, since your daughter's consented herself. I'm sure you've brought the wedding certificates as I asked you. So let both sides produce them now."

Aigu saw her father fumble in his girdle for something. The stick-like servant came in again to hand Seventh Master a small, flat, jet-black object shaped like a tortoise. Aigu was afraid something dreadful was going to happen. She darted a look at her father; but he was opening a blue cloth package at the table, and taking out silver dollars.

Seventh Master removed the tortoise's head, poured something from its body into his palm, then returned the flat-looking object to the stick-like servant. He rubbed one finger in his palm, then stuffed it up each nostril, staining his nose and upper lip a bright yellow. Then he wrinkled his nose as if about to sneeze.

Zhuang Musan was counting the silver dollars. Mr. Wei extracted a few from a pile which had not been counted, and handed them to Old Beast. He also changed the position of the red and green certificates, restoring them to their original owners.

"Put them away," he said. "You must see if the amount

is correct, Musan. This is no joking matter — all this silver. . . ."

"Ah — tchew!"

Though Aigu knew it was only Seventh Master sneezing, she could not help turning to look at him. His mouth was wide open and his nose was twitching. In two fingers he was still clutching the small object "used by the ancients in burials." Indeed, he was rubbing the side of his nose with it.

With some difficulty Zhuang Musan finished counting the money, and both sides put away the red and green certificates. Then they all seemed to draw themselves up, and tense expressions relaxed. Complete harmony prevailed.

"Good! This business has been settled satisfactorily," said Mr. Wei. Seeing that they looked on the point of leaving, he breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, there's nothing more to be done now. Congratulations on unravelling this knot! Must you be going? Won't you stay to share our New Year feast? This is a rare occasion."

"We mustn't stay," said Aigu. "We'll come to drink with you next year."

"Thank you, Mr. Wei. We won't drink just now. We have other business. . . ." Zhuang Musan, Old Beast and Young Beast withdrew most respectfully.

"What? Not a drop before you go?" Mr. Wei looked at Aigu who brought up the rear.

"Really we mustn't. Thank you, Mr. Wei."

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彷徨

鲁迅 著

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